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ABSTRACT

This booklet, based on the classroom work and experiences of 12 teachers in Australia, analyzes text retelling as a language developing process and illustrates effective procedures and activities successfully used in the classroom. The booklet contains eight sections: (1) What is Retelling?; (2) Retelling and Language Learning; (3) Using Retelling across the Curriculum; (4) Using Retelling for Evaluation; (5) Retelling in Practice; (6) Some Concerns Raised by Teachers; and (7) Retelling Works Best When... The eighth section, Teachers' Articles, includes the perspectives and insights of nine teachers who have incorporated retelling in their reading and writing lessons. (KEH)

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* an effective teaching practice
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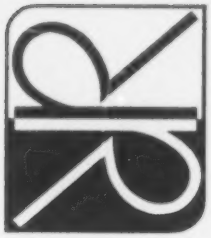

RETELLING

- **an effective teaching practice**
- **a powerful evaluation strategy**

Department of Education and The Arts Tasmania Australia

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USEFUL PUBLICATIONS

Brown, Hazel and Cambourne, Brian, *Read and Retell*, Methuen, Australia, 1987.

Butler, Andrea & Turbill, Jan, *Towards a Reading-Writing Classroom*, Primary English Teaching Association, Rozelle, 1984.

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INTRODUCTION

Retelling, as it is described in this booklet, was developed by Dr Brian Cambourne, Head of the Centre for Literacy Studies at the University of Wollongong, and Mrs Hazel Brown, a teacher with the Education Department in New South Wales.

Hazel Brown has used retelling over several years with her classes. She found, with Brian Cambourne, that it turned out to have a much more powerful influence on students' language use than they had expected. It helped her to find out a great deal more about each student's language development and to keep track of that development. At the same time it helped her students pick up and use a wide range of language features both in their retellings and in their other writings.

The Education Department of Tasmania became interested in retelling after a visit to Hobart by Brian Cambourne. A number of primary and secondary teachers around the state were invited to join a project to trial the strategy and to document what happened in their classrooms when they used it. The twelve teachers each chose one class and introduced retelling as one of a range of language activities for their students. The discoveries they made about retelling form the basis of this booklet, which concludes with articles by the teachers themselves. Like Hazel Brown and Brian Cambourne, they found retelling to be both an effective teaching practice and a powerful evaluation strategy.

WHAT IS RETELLING?

When people talk about retelling they usually mean something like a reconstruction of any kind of text; but the retelling procedure developed by Hazel Brown and Brian Cambourne involves more than this. It is a process in which students go through the following:

- *immersion in genre and topic*
- *prediction from the title of a text*
- *sharing the prediction with other members of a group*
- *predicting words and phrases that might be in the text*
- *sharing the predicted words and phrases*
- *reading (or hearing, or viewing) the text*
- *writing a retelling*
- *sharing and comparing the written retelling with other students.*

Retelling can be used with small groups or as a whole-class activity; it depends very much on the way the class usually works. Teachers can offer it as an option in a learning contract, or as part of a work-required contract, or as a compulsory small-group activity. Sometimes a teacher might offer different groups of students different texts and tasks, depending on their interests. As a general rule, the procedure works better if the students are not grouped according to ability, so that they can learn from each other when sharing.

When choosing texts, teachers need to keep in mind why they are using retelling. The text should not be too long (it should take the slowest reader no longer than ten minutes to read) and it should be an example of quality writing.

THE PROCEDURE FOR RETELLING

- **Immersion**

  Before retelling, teachers 'immerse' their students in the concepts, language, and structure of the retelling topic or genre. This means that during immersion, a teacher involves students in some intensive reading, writing, talking and listening around the central theme of the chosen retelling.

  Students cannot retell information when they have no background knowledge; neither can they use an unfamiliar genre. A retelling must come, therefore, only after students have been immersed in a unit of work, and the retelling itself must be an integral part of that unit.

  If, for example, students were working on producing a class newspaper, immersion could include displaying and reading newspaper articles of different kinds as well as writing newspaper articles about common experiences—all activities that would be part of a normal learning program. The re-

telling text could be a newspaper article on a familiar topic with the task of retelling it in the same style. A different approach would be to present a text which is not a newspaper article and ask the students to retell it as if they were writing for a newspaper.

At its most effective, retelling is a natural part of a student's usual learning program. Once it is seen in this way, and the texts and tasks are chosen to suit the program, immersion is not additional to the teacher's workload; however, its importance cannot be overstated.

- **Prediction from title (about 2 minutes)**
  From the title only, students are asked to predict what the text might be in one or two sentences.

- **Sharing predictions from title (about 2 minutes)**
  This can be done in pairs, small groups or as a whole class.

- **Prediction of words and phrases (about 2 minutes)**
  Students are asked to write some words and phrases that might occur in the text if their predictions are accurate.

- **Sharing predictions of words and phrases (about 2 minutes)**
  Again this can be done in pairs, small groups or as a whole class.

All prediction stages are important. They allow students to recall what they know about language such as words, syntax and literary devices (their linguistic resources). At the same time, they allow teachers to see the type of information students bring to the text (their referential backgrounds). In the process, teachers are able to judge the success of the previous immersion stage.

Sharing predictions is valuable because students can draw on each other's experiences and at the same time can improve their skills of discussion (conference skills). They give each other content and language to use in their retellings, they discuss choices made and they give positive feedback that will increase the confidence of others in the group.

- **Reading the text (about 10 minutes)**
  Usually teachers read the text to students who each have a copy. When teachers want to check how well students read unaided, students will each read the text provided, without the teacher reading aloud. On other occasions, teachers will want to focus on the listening skills of students and will read the text aloud without providing individual copies.

When students read the text, they read carefully and purposefully. Students say they often need to read in a different way when retelling. For example, a student who mainly reads novels by choice, explained that she usually read very quickly, skimming over details and then going back if necessary. She found that when retelling, she needed to read more attentively throughout. The experience of retelling has helped her to expand her reading approaches and to become a more flexible reader.

A range of text types — narrative, expository, poetry, maps, formulae, sets of instructions — can be used for written

retellings. What teachers choose will depend on the purpose for doing the retelling, the language skills of the students, the type of immersion which has occurred in the class, and students' previous experience with that form of text, as well as their previous experience of retelling.

- **Writing (about 10—15 minutes)**

  Students read the text as often as they need, but once they start writing, they do not look at the text again. Usually this is a quiet period of intense activity if the whole class is retelling, especially if the teacher retells too. All students should have the opportunity to finish their writing, but if they take too long, the early finishers may lose the impetus to share and the whole activity can become a long and weary process. Making sure that the text is a reasonable length will help. Students can also be asked to write not more than a page and to take no longer than 15–20 minutes.

  Teachers can manipulate the purpose of a retelling by varying instructions. They can do this in a number of ways, including asking students to retell a story:
  - for friends to enjoy, who have not heard it before
  - from the point of view of one of the characters in the text
  - in another form, such as a letter.

- **Sharing and comparing retellings (about 5–10 minutes)**

  This is best done in pairs or in small groups, before sharing (if desired) as a whole class. Sharing and comparing retellings can involve looking for:
  - similarities and differences in each other's retellings
  - 'muddled meanings', that alter the meaning of the original text
  - words or phrases that are different from the original text, but still retain the meaning (paraphrasing)
  - parts of each other's retellings that are particularly well written.

If students are unfamiliar with supportive and purposeful sharing, teachers will need to model it for them. They can do this by taking small groups to talk about their writing or by encouraging them to work together on group tasks. Giving students specific directions (such as identifying the most effective descriptions in their partner's writing or finding good examples of paraphrasing) will also help.

THE VALUE OF RETELLING IN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

Teachers have found retelling is valuable in their language programs for a number of reasons.

- **Retelling gives students experience in reading and writing different types of texts**

  For example, after 'immersing' her students by reading various tall tales and bush yarns and talking about them, Pauline Camm asked her students to retell some yarns and then to write their own. She noticed that the colloquial language used in the yarns and the device of the snappy punchline came through in the students' own stories. One student commented that through retelling he had learned what a tall tale was like and so he felt much better equipped to write his own.

- **Retelling helps students understand information presented in different ways**
  For example, Glenda Russell's students had been learning about Antarctica so she used a series of pictures of Antarctic scenes in a retelling session. In their written retellings the students drew on and extended their knowledge of Antarctica. Similarly, after immersion in Australian geography, Jenny Barry's students were asked to retell what a map of Australia had communicated to them. Retelling gave them support in reading and interpreting the map.

- **Retelling encourages students to share and compare**
  Because students are looking at retellings of the same text, the sharing is more intensely focused than when completely different pieces of writing are shared.

- **Retelling supports other language learning approaches**
  Teachers can integrate retelling into all their activities such as peer-conferencing, shared reading, speculating and predicting, reading and writing.

RETELLING AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

RETELLING AND THE 'CONDITIONS OF LEARNING'

Retelling works best when the 'conditions of learning', identified by Brian Cambourne (Brown and Cambourne, 1987 p.26) and quoted below, are in place. Retelling itself helps teachers to establish these learning conditions.

Immersion

Learners need to be immersed in text of all kinds.

Immersion is an essential first step in the retelling procedure.

Demonstration

Learners need to receive many demonstrations of how texts are constructed and used.

The retelling texts themselves serve as written demonstrations while the sharing and discussion of these texts demonstrate ways of reading, writing, conversing and responding to others' retellings.

Expectation

Expectations of those to whom learners are bound are powerful coercers of behaviour. 'We achieve what we expect to achieve; we fail if we expect to fail; we are more likely to engage with demonstrations of those whom we regard as significant and who hold high expectations for us.'

Teachers convey their expectations in so many ways, but particularly by their selection of the text and their explanation of the tasks to students. One teacher clearly showed her expectation that students were the writers in control of the text by answering queries with comments such as, 'It's your writing, you're in the driver's seat — choose the best place you think to start'.

In some classes peer expectations conflicted with teachers' expectations when peers discouraged visible enthusiasm for reading and writing. One teacher found that he needed to organise his groups carefully to break up restrictive peer influences, while still keeping friends together for mutual support.

Responsibility

Learners need to make their own decisions about when, how and what 'bits' to learn in any learning task. Learners who lose the ability to make decisions are 'depowered'

Retelling offers students all kinds of 'bits' of learning including ideas for writing, organisational frameworks, vocabulary, ways of sharing, literary devices, conventions such as spelling and punctuation and so on. Each student is responsible for taking what they individually need from the retelling text. It

may be particular words the author used, the way paragraphs are defined, a type of character shown, the use of story patterns, or any other aspect of the text.

Use

Learners need time and opportunity to use, employ and practise their developing control in functional, realistic, non-artificial ways.

In a retelling session, students read, write and discuss in purposeful ways. However, they also need opportunities to use what they are learning through retelling in other contexts. They have opportunities for this in their own free-choice writing and in the discussions they have of their writings and readings that are not used as retelling texts.

Approximation

Learners must be free to approximate the desired model — 'mistakes' are essential for learning to occur.

Students become more confident and get much more from retelling when they feel their approximations are accepted. Teachers found it was important to encourage students to accept their peers' approximations. Through their own comments, teachers were able to foster the idea that paraphrase and innovation on the text are to be valued. They found that they needed to be careful about appearing to criticise students' deviations from the text by avoiding comments such as, 'Who got the beginning right?'

Response

Learners must receive 'feedback' from exchanges with more knowledgeable 'others'. Response must be relevant, appropriate, timely, readily available, non-threatening, with no strings attached.

At several stages during the retelling procedure students can receive feedback from their peers and the teacher. These responses allow for students to have their ideas acknowledged, discussed and evaluated in a positive way. They also help students to see the kinds of retellings that are valued so that they don't feel the aim is for a word-perfect reproduction.

Some teachers run retelling sessions with different groups at different times in order to work closely with a small number of students. Other teachers use whole-class retellings, but respond to each student either orally or in writing.

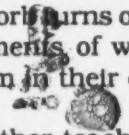
'LINGUISTIC SPILLOVER'

'Linguistic spillover' is a term used by Brown and Cambourne (1987 p.15). When applied to retelling, it means the way students internalise features of the retelling text which they then re-use, wholly or in part, at different times and in different ways when they speak, read or write.

'Linguistic spillover', of course, occurs in ways other than just through retelling, but because teachers know which retelling texts have been used, they can more easily identify 'spillover' from retelling sources.

Teachers noticed that students were using ideas from their retellings in their other writings. After having retold the fable, *The Dog and the Bone*, Katy, a reluctant writer who had never completed a piece of writing to publication stage, developed and published her own story using the same character as in the fable.

One teacher saw retelling as providing opportunities for her students to 'walk in another writer's shoes'; thus allowing them to absorb turns of phrase, particular words and elements of writing style and to reproduce them in their own writing later on.



Another teacher reported that his students became aware of direct speech punctuation after retelling texts which featured that convention and were able to use it in their own writing. Other conventions of the written language, such as spelling and capitalisation, can also be internalised through retelling.

USING RETELLING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Retelling can be used in many curriculum areas and for many different purposes. It can be used with a wide variety of different types of texts ranging from maps, symbols, diagrams, graphs, tables and paintings to reports, factual accounts, films, biographies, fables and instructions. Thus retelling effectively helps students to see how writing is used for different purposes, from the geography text to the free verse poem. Often teachers ask students to change the form of the text when retelling (for example to retell a map in writing) so that they can see how well their students are able to use what they have learned.

For retelling to be successful though, students need to be familiar with the procedure and to have been immersed in the topic or genre of the text.

RETELLING IN MATHEMATICS

Students in a year six class were familiar with retelling and had experienced a number of variations of the procedure but they had not used retelling in areas other than language and social science.

During previous mathematics sessions the students had been immersed in a unit of work which included recognising, measuring and constructing different types of angles and triangles. Their teacher used retelling to find out how well the students had understood the information which had been mainly diagrammatic and oral.

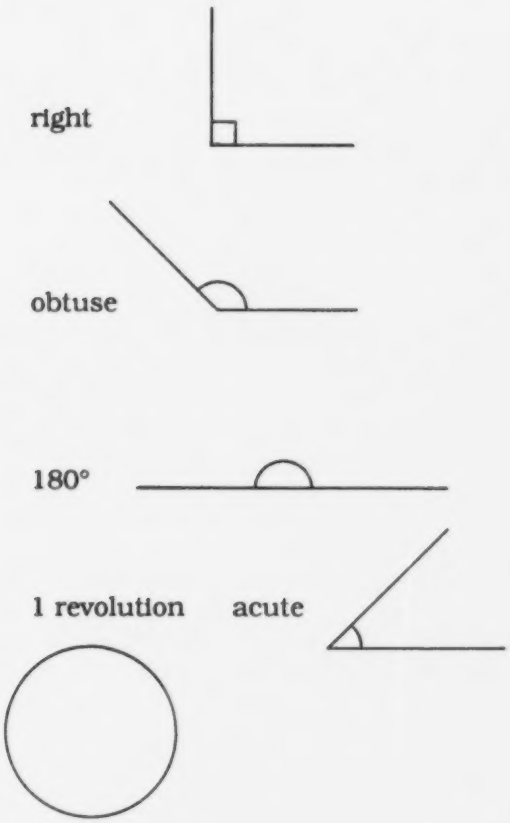
Students were told that they were going to do a mathematical retelling. They were given the title, *Angle Knowledge*, and asked to predict what they thought it might be about (no clues were given about the nature or form of the information in the text). After sharing and comparing their predictions, the students were given copies of the text; they looked at the information and briefly discussed it before they put aside the texts and began their retellings.

The teacher told the students to make their own decisions about how to retell the information; some chose to describe the angles in words, while others used both words and diagrams in their retelling.

The retelling provided the teacher with information on how well the students were able to:

- accurately retell the information of the text
- use, spell and give clear definitions of the terminology
- write in the genre of mathematical texts
- use mathematical implements such as protractors, compasses and rulers.

Angle Knowledge



Babylonians devised the measurement of 360° for the measurment of a circle.

RETELLING IN SOCIAL STUDIES

A year 5/6 class had been learning about the geography of Australia. Working in small groups, students had studied various regions of Australia and become familiar with vocabulary associated with geography, such as 'direction', 'mountain range' and 'Tropic of Capricorn'. They had already used atlases to find information and had some understanding of how to use them.

The teacher's purposes for using retelling were to find out how well the students could read and interpret information presented in a map, and to encourage students to use the information they had already learned in their study of the geography of Australia.

Students were asked to predict what a map of Australia would include. After sharing their predictions, they were given atlases and asked to turn to the map of Australia. They spent a few minutes studying the map before talking to their partners about its features such as the land, the oceans, the seas, the deserts and the neighbouring countries. The students were then invited to share their discussions with the rest of the class. Back in pairs, they looked at the different states of Australia and talked to each other about the features of each state. Some then shared these discussions with the whole class.

The written retelling consisted of students writing about the geography of Australia, as shown on the map. In the end-of-session sharing and comparing, the students, in pairs, looked at the differences between each other's piece of writing and discussed the ways each had organised the information. As a class group, they shared their writing by reading aloud the parts they thought were particularly well written and related them to the map. This was followed by a more general discussion of how geography texts are organised.

USING RETELLING FOR EVALUATION

Retelling is a powerful evaluation strategy which fits with the Pathways' model of gathering information about students' language development.

Pathways lists three ways of gathering such information:

- *observing students in a variety of contexts as they use language*
- *talking with students about their language use*
- *collecting samples of their language use.*

Retelling provides teachers with opportunities to use all three methods by:

- *observing as students predict, discuss, respond, read and write*
- *talking and sharing with students as they go through these procedures*
- *collecting the retellings to gain further information.*

Retelling allows teachers to pinpoint specific aspects of students' language development and, by providing natural opportunities for their use, to evaluate them. The retelling text a teacher chooses is crucial to this process because it can supplement the information they already have about their students.

For example, a teacher may want to focus on the way students read maps or diagrams. A well chosen retelling can give information about what students bring to and take from a map and the meaning they construct from it. Again, a teacher who is concentrating on a particular type of writing, such as writing to persuade, will choose a retelling that gives students opportunities to develop and demonstrate their control of persuasive language, tone and style.

Once retelling is an established classroom activity, teachers can use the following cycle that provides continuing evaluation:

- *observe students' needs*
- *set a purpose for retelling*
- *check that students are immersed in the genre or topic*
- *find a suitable text and decide the retelling task*
- *implement the task and observe the process*
- *analyse and evaluate retellings, evaluate teaching*
- *give feedback to the students*
- *plan future teaching.*

OBSERVING RETELLING

Teachers can observe students by organising only one small group to work on a retelling at a given time. If whole class retellings are used, several students can be targeted for observation.

Some questions to keep in mind when observing:

- Do ideas come readily when predicting?
- How does the student listen when the teacher is reading?

- How does the student listen to other students?
- How does the student read—slowly, quickly, continuously, in bursts?
- How many times does the student read the text?
- How does the student write—fluently, slowly, continuously, stopping to re-read or revise?
- Does the student share his or her writing confidently and willingly?
- How does the student listen to or read someone else's retelling?
- Does the student offer comments on his or her retelling or on those of other students?
- Does the student look for specific things in a partner's work, such as paraphrasing?

Some appropriate Pathways indicators to use when observing:

- sees self positively as a language-user
- anticipates, speculates and predicts
- uses language to express ideas, feelings and opinions
- responds sensitively to others
- participates in group experiences
- speaks clearly and fluently
- responds sensitively to stories and information
- uses literary experiences to help make sense of the world
- listens purposefully.

TALKING WITH STUDENTS ABOUT RETELLING

Talking with students about their experiences with retelling will give teachers information that observation can't pick up. Teachers can find, by talking with students, the different strategies students use when predicting, discussing, reading and writing. Some students, for example, may visualise the whole text and some may try to memorise it line by line.

Questions such as, *What do you concentrate on when you read for retelling?, How do you write a retelling? What do you look for in your partner's retelling?* will help teachers with their evaluations. They will also help students to become aware of the strategies they use and at the same time help to improve them.

EVALUATING WRITTEN RETELLINGS

Evaluating written retellings has some advantages over evaluating students' other writings. Because the retelling text is familiar, a teacher knows the content of the writing and so finds it much easier to perceive the language control demonstrated by students. By comparing the retelling with the original text, a teacher can note what students have done with it and clearly identify any innovations students have made.

Helpful approaches

Different approaches to evaluating written retellings will suit different teachers, texts and tasks but teachers have found the following ways to be helpful.

Some teachers analyse retellings by reading them through and noting down significant features in their general anecdotal records, often with the *Pathways'* indicators in front of them for reference. Their analysis includes:

- what the predictions reveal about students' knowledge of the genre and topic and their control of language

- meanings students have taken from the text
- changes students have made to the meaning
- the way students have structured their retelling
- organisational devices they used
- features of the text form which students have used (e.g. the use of the moral in a fable)
- vocabulary and phrasing taken from the text
- synonyms and paraphrases the students use
- elaborations and innovations to the text
- 'spillover' from other language experiences
- spelling strategies used
- punctuation used.

The following headings, suggested by Hazel Brown, have been very useful for some teachers:

- meaning — ideas, clarity, relevance to form in purpose
- structure — organisation, cohesion, sequence
- conventions — spelling, usage, punctuation
- cognitive abilities — ability to infer, predict, hypothesise and generalise.

When teachers are familiar with using retelling for evaluation their analysis is often guided by their purpose for each retelling. The following five examples show how *Pathways'* indicators can be chosen to fit each retelling purpose.

1. The teacher's purpose for retelling was to enable the students to develop effective description in their writing.
   - Immersion of students included reading and discussing extracts taken from *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Of Mice and Men.*
   - The retelling was a descriptive extract from *Sounder.*
   - *Pathways'* indicators chosen were:
     adjusts language use to suit situation and role relationship
     uses language to entertain
     responds to and practises the use of language as an art form
     displays creative, imaginative, intuitive and original thinking

2. The teacher's purpose for retelling was to enable students to write clear instructions.
   - Immersion of students included showing students how to use a video camera for a specific purpose.
   - The retelling involved students retelling what they had learned about using the camera in the form of a list of do's and don'ts
   - *Pathways'* indicators chosen were:
     uses language to inform
     uses the symbols and conventions of tables, graphs and diagrams
     organises ideas coherently
     matches conventions to purpose, audience and form
     selects and presents content in a form appropriate to audience and situation.

3. The teacher's purpose for retelling was to enable students to maintain a consistent point of view.
   - Immersion of students included reading poems and stories told from different points of view, such as sections from Paul Zindal's *The Pigman,* Sara Henderson Hay's poem *The Builders,* and Raymond Briggs' *Father Christmas.*
   - The retelling involved students retelling *Cinderella* from the point of view of one of the ugly sisters.

- *Pathways*' indicators chosen were:
  recognises and maintains consistency of style
  organises thoughts logically
  selects and presents content in a form appropriate to audience and situation
  responds to and practises the use of language as an art form.

4. The teacher's purpose for retelling was to assess students' comprehension of graphs.
   - Immersion of students included their creating graphs from the results of a survey they had conducted.
   - The retelling involved students retelling from a graph.
   - *Pathways*' indicators chosen were:
     uses the symbols and conventions of tables, graphs and diagrams
     recognises implicit meaning
     organises ideas coherently.

5. The teacher's purpose for retelling was to enable students to develop and maintain the atmosphere of a piece of writing.
   - Immersion of students included reading extracts from books with atmosphere, such as Roald Dahl's *Boy*, plus oral storybuilding.
   - The retelling involved students retelling an atmosphere piece and developing the plot to its conclusion.
   - *Pathways*' indicators chosen were:
     shows sensitivity to style and tone
     recognises and maintains consistency of style
     uses language to entertain
     responds to and practises the use of language as an art form
     selects and presents content in a form appropriate to audience and situation.

SELF-EVALUATION BY STUDENTS

Because most students feel confident about retelling, they often write more when they are retelling. This experience of success encourages them to reflect on their own retelling and adds to their perception of themselves as effective, competent language users. As well, there are times available during retelling that give students opportunities for self-evaluation and peer-evaluation.

A teacher can help students with their self-evaluation by being specific about the purpose for each retelling. For example, when one teacher was using retelling to give students the experience of creating atmosphere in their own writing, she explained her purpose to the students and suggested that they would be able to use what they had learned through retelling in their own writing. Students then were able to go through their retellings confidently and identify the places where they felt they had been particularly successful in creating the atmosphere of the story.

Students can be encouraged to evaluate the whole process of retelling, an important practice for the student and a most helpful one for a teacher's own evaluation of each student.

SELF-EVALUATION BY TEACHERS

Retelling forms a valuable basis for a teacher's self-evaluation and planning. Observing students as they retell, talking with them and

looking closely at their retellings, give teachers many opportunities for reflecting on their teaching programs, routines and resources. They can see what students are taking from the texts they have read, viewed and talked about, and can see whether students need further experiences with texts of various kinds. How students share will also help teachers to see the talking and listening skills students are developing and to plan what can be done to encourage further development.

RETELLING IN PRACTICE

The following three examples of students' written retellings and their teachers' evaluations come from a variety of schools and represent a range of student responses. Despite these differences, all three students worked in a learning environment that was co-operative and supportive.

Teachers will develop their own ways of evaluating students' written retellings. The teachers of Virginia, Christopher and Sally have all used different ways. The three students were interviewed a number of times to find out how each of them evaluated retelling. Their responses are included, together with an outline of the retelling procedure that Christopher's teacher used.

VIRGINIA

Virginia is in year 6 at a large suburban primary school.

The retelling text: *James Harrison*

James Harrison was born in Scotland in 1815. As a boy he became an apprentice to a printer in Glasgow.

When he was 22 he was given the job of delivering and setting up a printing plant in Australia. He decided to stay in Australia, and began writing articles for the local papers and magazines.

In 1840 he went to Geelong in Victoria to help start the Geelong *Advertiser*, a newspaper that is still being printed today. In 1842 he was able to buy the *Advertiser* for himself.

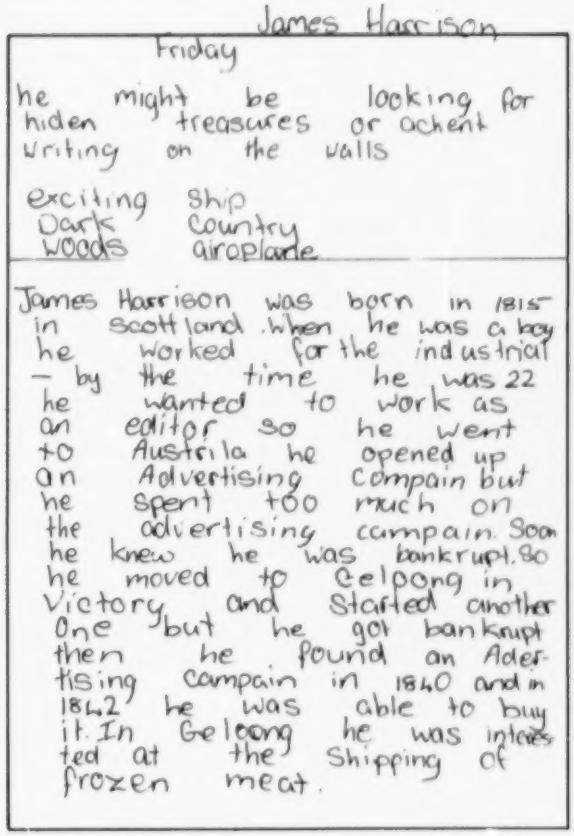
Geelong was the centre of a farming district with a port used to ship local products. While running the *Advertiser*, Harrison became interested in the freezing of meat.

He developed a method of making ice by evaporating ether. Using this method, he built what was the first ice works in Australia.

Unfortunately, while doing all this, he overspent. In 1861 he was declared bankrupt. He had to sell the *Advertiser* but was kept on as editor.

In 1865 Harrison started another newspaper in Geelong. Again he found he had not enough money to keep it running and had to sell it in the following year.

Virginia's written retelling



James Harrison

Friday

he might be looking for hiden treasures or achent writing on the walls

exciting ship
Dark country
woods airoplande

James Harrison was born in 1815 in scottland .When he was a boy he worked for the industrial – by the time he was 22 he wanted to work as an editor so he went to Austrila he opened up an Advertising compain but he spent too much on the advertising campain. Soon he knew he was bankrupt.So he moved to Gelpong in Victory and Started another One but he got bankrupt then he found an Adertising compain in 1840 and in 1842 he was able to buy it. In Geloong he was interested at the Shipping of frozen meat.

Evaluation of Virginia's written retelling of *James Harrison*

(Before being asked to retell this text, Virginia and her class had been immersed in a unit of work on inventors and inventions.)

Although her prediction is inaccurate, it demonstrates that she is prepared to take risks and is not frightened of being wrong.

Her spelling is generally conventional and she appears to have a reasonable control of the use of capitals and full stops.

She has tried to make some sense of interpreting the name of the Geelong newspaper, the *Advertiser*, even though she has been confused by it and has taken it to mean an advertising campaign. She understands that James Harrison was bankrupt on two occasions but does not understand the reasons for his bankruptcy. She missed the important points that James Harrison developed a method for making ice and built Australia's first ice works; she merely said that he was interested in the shipping of frozen meat.

Virginia's control of the conventions suggests that she is ready to build on her knowledge of punctuation and would benefit from assistance in this area. The difficulty she had with the text indicates that she needs much more experience with expository writing. She also needs considerable assistance to distinguish the main points in a passage. (In this retelling, she seems to have tried to remember all of the text rather than picking out the main points). The use of short, less detailed passages would help her to grasp summarising skills and develop greater confidence for tackling expository texts.

Interviews with Virginia

Virginia sees retelling as a part of the normal classroom language program and believes that it has helped her to use, write and pronounce new and unusual words. She also sees retelling as a test of her memory and believes that she is good at it because she can write retellings which are similar to the original texts.

When reading texts, she concentrates on the most important words and, depending on the

text's difficulty, reads the text two to four times. Once she has read a text, she sits with her eyes shut, trying to remember it all before attempting to write.

Over the year Virginia has experienced a variety of types of retelling. She has retold fables, descriptive passages and expository passages. In addition to these, she has also retold maths topics, using both words and symbols. She has become more confident in her writing ability, is prepared to persevere with writing stories, and is happy to work independently. While some of these changes may only be in part due to her experiences with retelling, the retellings themselves have been very interesting to her teacher because they have reflected these changes over the year.

CHRISTOPHER

Christopher is in year 6 at a small country primary school.

The teacher's procedure

The teacher had two purposes. They were to see how well the students could reproduce the structure, style and language of the fable and to look at examples of students' first draft writing.

- Immersion

  The class had been looking at fables as a form of narrative. The students had read many different fables and had talked about features which are common to the fable form, such as length of story, type of vocabulary, types of characters and the fact that there was a message (moral) which had a wider application than the story itself.

- Prediction from title (about 2 minutes)

  Each student was given a copy of the text, with only the title visible. Most students knew at once that it was a fable and began to write predictions based on the crane being the hero and being treated badly by the wolf.

- Sharing predictions from title (about 3 minutes)

  In groups of three or four, the students read each other's predictions and made comments about them.

- Prediction of words and phrases (about 2 minutes)

  Because of their knowledge of fables, the students predicted words such as: *moral, eat, hungry, fearful, clever, cunning,* and *tricked.*

- Sharing predictions of words and phrases (about 3 minutes)

  In the same groups as before, students read each other's predictions and discussed them.

- Reading the text (about 10 minutes)

  As the teacher read the text, the students followed silently, using their copies of the fable. When the teacher had finished he told the students that they could re-read the text as many times as they wished until they were ready to write.

- Writing (about 15 minutes)

  When students were ready to write they were asked to put their copies of the text away. The students wrote quietly and without much conferring. Many students proof-read as they wrote, others did not. Some students wanted to share their re-

tellings with others as soon as they had finished; others simply left them on their desks and went on with other work until everyone had finished.

- Sharing (about 10 minutes)

  In the same groups as before, students read each other's retellings, comparing them with their own and with the original text. They talked about whether the moral had been included, and features such as direct speech, punctuation and story sequence. Most students had remembered the story, retelling it accurately.

  The class then moved to the front and, led by the teacher, discussed their retellings briefly. Students were invited to share parts of their own retellings which had been particularly well written. The moral of the fable was discussed. Many of the students were able to relate it to incidents from other stories and from their own lives.

The retelling text: *The Wolf and the Crane*

One day a hungry Wolf ate his dinner so fast that he got a bone stuck in his throat. The bone in his throat hurt him very much. He cried out in great pain.

'Oh, someone please help me. Please take this bone out of my throat. I promise I will give half of all that I have in the world to anyone who will take this bone out of my throat'.

A Crane heard the Wolf crying.

'I have a long bill,' said the Crane. 'I think that I can take the bone out of your throat. But will you give me half of all that you own?'

'I am in such great pain,' cried the Wolf. 'Only take this bone out of my throat and I will give you anything that you ask.'

And so the Crane put his bill into the throat of the Wolf. He took hold of the bone with his bill and pulled it out.

'There,' said the Crane, 'I have pulled the bone out of your throat. Now give me half of all the things that you own.'

But the Wolf just laughed and laughed.

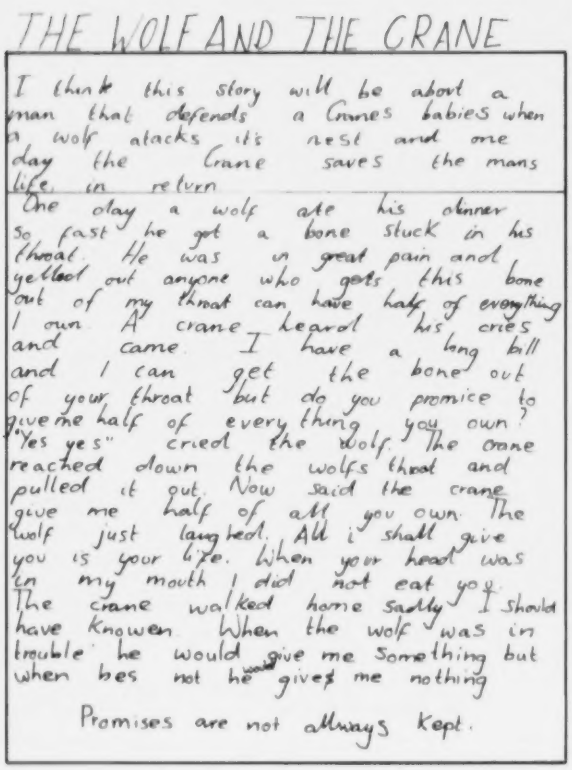
'I have given you your life,' said the Wolf to the Crane. 'You have had your head in my mouth. I did not bite it off. Your life is all that I will give you.'

The Crane went sadly home.

'I should have known better,' he said to himself. 'When the Wolf needed help, he would give me anything. But when the Wolf did not need help, he would give me nothing.'

Promises are not always kept.

Christopher's written retelling



THE WOLF AND THE CRANE

I think this story will be about a man that defends a Cranes babies when a wolf atacks it's nest and one day the Crane saves the mans life in relurn

One olay a wolf ate his dinner so fast he got a bone stuck in his throat. He was in great pain and yelled out anyone who gets this bone out of my throat can have half of everything I own. A crane heard his cries and came. I have a long bill and I can get the bone out of your throat but do you promice to give me half of every thing you own? "Yes yes" cried the Wolf. The crane reached down the wolfs throat and pulled it out. Now said the crane give me half of all you own. The wolf just laughed. All i shall give you is your life. When your head was in my mouth I did not eat you. The crane walked home sadly I should have knowen. When the wolf was in trouble he would give me something but when hes not he gives me nothing

Promises are not allways kept.

Evaluation of Christopher's written retelling

Christopher's predictions were good. While not correct, they were compatible with the fable genre and reflected his knowledge of the characteristics of cranes and wolves.

Christopher has retained the meaning of the original text in his retelling. No part of the narrative was omitted. He has included the moral and it has been written in exactly the same words as were used in the original text. In fact, his retelling uses substantial sections of text remembered word for word.

The correct sequence has been maintained and there is a unity between the parts of the retelling and the whole. The language, structure and form, typical of the fable genre, have been reproduced.

There has been an attempt to use paragraphs. The first line is indented. Christopher may be ready for individualised help in using paragraphs.

He has very good control of spelling. There are only four errors and each of these is a reasonable alternative to the correct spelling (*atacks* for *attacks; promice* for *promise; knowen* for *known;* and *allways* for *always).*

Christopher has used appropriate vocabulary and has shown a good control of syntax. He has handled the use of full stops well and has a reasonable control of capitals.

He has attempted some use of direct speech punctuation and this is another area where individual assistance could be valuable.

Interviews with Christopher

Christopher finds fables much easier to retell than expository texts because he feels familiar with narrative in general and fables in particular. The sequential notion of fables, as well as their underlying morals, make them easier for him to remember.

By doing retellings, Christopher believes that his reading and memory skills will continue to improve. He is learning to pick out the main points when reading and then to retell in his own words. The development of such

reference skills and the ability to paraphrase has helped him when doing project work.

Christopher has found there are differences between the way he reads and writes for retellings and the way he reads and writes for other purposes. When retelling, he reads more slowly and carefully and writes more quickly.

During the year Christopher has noticed that retellings have helped to improve his writing. He is now neater and his skills in using direct speech, paragraphs and phrasing have improved. Because he has been reading his retellings aloud to other students at sharing times, Christopher now is better able to revise his work.

Christopher sees retelling as part of the classroom language program. He does not see it as a test and feels very confident about it.

SALLY

Sally is in year 8 at a large country high school.

The retelling text: *The Poor Old Dog*

There was an old Dog who was very poor. The only coat he had to wear was mostly holes held together by ragged threads. He could feel the pebbles on the pavement through the thin soles of his tattered shoes. He slept in the park because he had no home.

The Dog spent most of his time searching in garbage cans. He found bits of string and buttons. These he sold for pennies to passers-by.

The Dog always walked with his nose close to the curb, looking for things to sell. That is how he came to find the gold ring that was lying in the gutter.

'My luck has changed,' cried the Dog, 'for I am sure this is a magic ring!'

The Dog rubbed the ring and said, 'I wish for a new coat. I wish for new shoes. I wish for a house to live in. I wish these wishes would come true right now!'

But nothing happened. The Dog felt the wind through the holes in his coat. He felt the pebbles under his thin shoes. That night he slept on his usual bench in the park.

Several days later, the Dog saw a note on a lamp-post. The note said 'Lost: gold ring. Large reward. Mr. Terrier, 10 Wealthy Lane.'

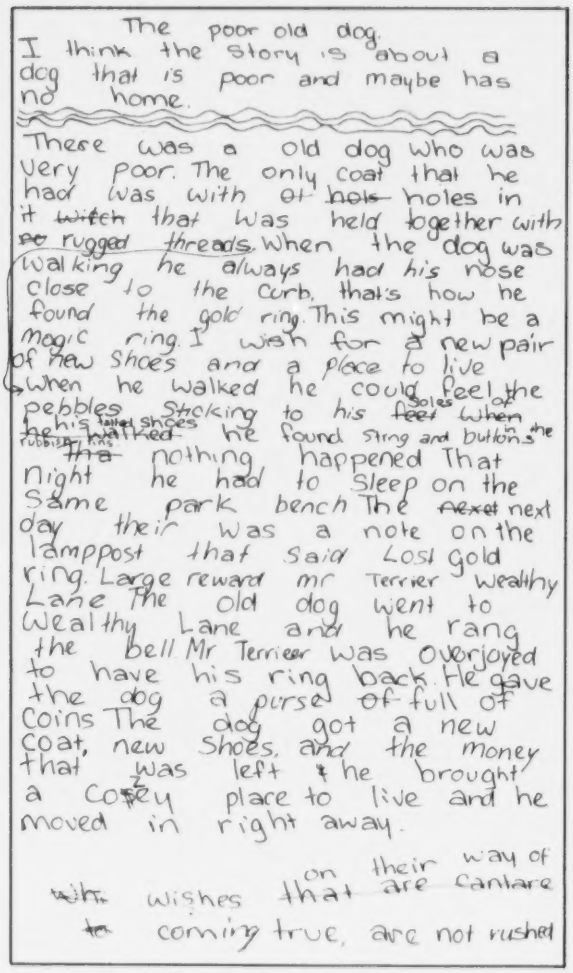
The old Dog hurried to Wealthy Lane. Mr. Terrier was overjoyed to have his ring returned. He thanked the Dog profusely and gave him a bulging purse that was full of coins.

The Dog bought a warm fur coat. He bought a pair of good shoes with thick soles.

There was a large amount of money left over. The Dog used the rest of it as a down payment on a cosy little house. He moved right in and never had to sleep in the park again.

Wishes, on their way to coming true, will not be rushed.

Sally's written retelling



The poor old dog

I think the story is about a dog that is poor and maybe has no home.

There was a old dog who was very poor. The only coat that he had was with ~~of~~ ~~hols~~ holes in it ~~with~~ that was held together with ~~so rugged~~ threads. When the dog was walking he always had his nose close to the curb. that's how he found the gold ring. This might be a magic ring. I wish for a new pair of new shoes and a place to live When he walked he could feel the pebbles ~~Stoking~~ to his ~~feet~~ soles when ~~the his~~ ~~tatted~~ shoes ~~the~~ he found string and buttons ~~the~~ rubbish ~~tha~~ nothing happened That night he had to sleep on the Same park bench The ~~nexet~~ next day their was a note on the lamppost that said Lost gold ring. Large reward mr Terrier wealthy Lane The old dog went to Wealthy Lane and he rang the bell Mr Terriear was overjoyed to have his ring back. He gave the dog a purse of full of coins The dog got a new coat, new shoes, and the money that was left ~~t~~ he brought a cosey place to live and he moved in right away.

~~with~~ wishes ~~that~~ on their way of are fanfare ~~to~~ coming true, are not rushed

Evaluation of Sally's written retelling (using *Pathways'* indicators)

(The main feature of the text that the teacher wanted students to learn about was the structure of the narrative, leading to a moral at the end.)

- 'Uses a range of language forms'
  Sally has used aspects of the fable form such as the moral and (in describing the coat and the shoes) the repetition of a language pattern. She inserted the section dealing with the dog feeling the pebbles through his soles further down in the text, but put an arrow in to show where it should go to fit the pattern, next to the description of the coat. She uses several organisational devices and time-shift devices from the original, such as, *Nothing happened* and *That night ....*

- 'Recognises and achieves consistency of style'
  Sally uses story phrases such as *There was an old dog* and appropriate words from the original such as *overjoyed, tattered, ragged.* After some editing she presents the moral as *Wishes on their way of coming true are not rushed*, an approximation of the original.

- 'Responds sensitively to others'
  Sally readily shared both her prediction and her writing when working in a small group. She listened and made brief approving comments to other students when they were sharing. When a whole-class discussion was in progress she did not volunteer any answers to the teacher's questions, but willingly shared her prediction when directly asked by the teacher.

- 'Matches conventions to purpose, audience and form'
  Sally uses full stops appropriately and makes one attempt at using quotation marks. She reproduces a colon in its correct position. She seems to get around her spelling problem with *which* by replacing it with *that*. In other places she is willing to attempt unfamiliar spellings. Her spelling

errors occur with words from the original, *rugged* (ragged) and *tatted* (tattered), and with homophones *witch* (which) and *their* (there).

- Other noticeable features
  Sally uses several revision strategies. She corrects and changes words as she writes and replaces phrases and inserts a sentence after writing.

  Sally made a one-sentence prediction which takes *poor* literally and adds the detail of the dog having no home. Through her prediction, Sally shows that she knows the dog could be treated like a human character in this story, showing human characteristics such as poverty.

Possible future teaching directions for Sally

- Build on Sally's ability to confer with others about reading and writing, perhaps by introducing more specific sharing strategies for her to use such as 'borrow a bit' or 'muddled meanings'.

- Help her to be more expansive in prediction, perhaps by encouraging word/phrase prediction and by using prediction in other contexts such as during shared reading.

- Help her to make explicit what she knows about the fable form, perhaps by setting up a small-group discussion to work out a set of characteristics of fables from the students' experience of them.

- Give her increased exposure to reading materials with rich descriptions and interesting phrasing by choosing some short stories or poems to share with her and inviting her to use them to help her with her own writing.

- Have a talk with her about the homophones which are tripping her up and help her to find ways to remember which spelling goes with which meaning.

- Look at her other writing to see whether she shows any other signs of awareness of direct speech punctuation, before demonstrating it to her—in the context of her own writing and by using models from her reading.

Interviews with Sally

Sally thinks retellings are like memorising and that they help her to use some words she hasn't come across before. By doing retellings she finds out how these words are spelt and what they mean. In *The Poor Old Dog* she discovered the word *morsel* which she worked out meant something like speck. She also came across the word *overjoyed* which wasn't new to her but which she would like to use in her own writing.

When writing a retelling, Sally's strategy is to put down what she can, then go back and add other bits as she remembers them.

Sally feels that students' reactions to retellings depend mainly on the quality of text being used. Good texts influence her to try to write similarly. Her reading of the texts is done in the same way that she reads most things — slowly so that she can pick up the meaning.

After a year of retelling, Sally considers a good retelling to be one that covers what she considers to be the interesting points of the text. Although she continues to associate retellings with memorising, she doesn't see them as a test in which students have to get everything down. She believes all students can do retellings, whether or not they are good readers and writers.

SOME CONCERNS RAISED BY TEACHERS

- **My students don't like retelling procedure—they say it's boring**

  Do the students know why they are doing retelling and how it might help them to become better language users? Do they value what they can learn through retelling? Can they make links between retelling and other language activities? Do they, for example, have opportunities to write the kinds of texts they are retelling?

  Students may feel that retelling is just a memory test. When introducing and discussing retelling it is important not to give the impression that the aim is for students to reproduce the text perfectly as a test of their memories.

  Many students say that their response to retelling is dependent on the texts. Long, involved texts, whether fiction or fact, may be extremely difficult to retell and may not be appropriate. Texts that are full of dates and names seem to encourage students to treat retelling like a memory test. On the other hand, texts which have interesting language patterns and features seem to invite retelling. Since the texts serve as models for students' writing, they need to be well written and because retelling provides an intensive reading experience for students, the texts need to be worth reading.

- **I can't find good texts for my students**

  Teachers involved in the project used a range of texts including fables, fairy tales, anthologies of prose and poetry, atlases (for maps and diagrams) videos, newspaper articles, pictures and other students' writings. Teacher-in-role (a teacher playing the role of a nurse, for example) has also been used successfully as a text. Some teachers also wrote their own texts.

  Read and Retell (Cambourne and Brown 1987) contains a large number of texts that can be photocopied.

- **My students don't share very well—they just read each other's retellings and that's it**

  Before introducing retelling, one teacher set up a regular classroom routine in which students worked with a writing partner to look at specific aspects of their writing. She taught them to use the *show not tell* technique of giving specific details when appropriate. Students worked with bald statements like *the room is empty* and clothed them in specific details. After some experience of this, they were able to identify places in their own and others' writings where it was necessary to include specific detail. (This technique is explained in *Teaching Writing, Essays from the Bay Area Writing Project* 1982)

The teacher continued this approach with retelling. She introduced phrases for them to use that provided students with a specific basis for comparison such as *borrow a bit, muddled meanings* and *paraphrase power.*

When the retelling has a literary focus such as character development or description, the students' sharing can concentrate on where their partners have made the character seem real or where they have produced effective description.

- **In my secondary school I can't seem to fit a retelling into a 40–minute lesson**

  A retelling takes at least 30 minutes and some take a bit longer. Check that the text is not too long and that the early stages (prediction from title and sharing this; predicting words and phrases and sharing these) take only about 10 minutes. This should help ensure that there is enough time for students to read as often as they need to, as well as to write and to share and compare. Some secondary teachers found that they could leave sharing and comparing to the next lesson and it would still work. Others found that their students lost incentive.

- **Retelling seems like a rigid procedure—it's a bit lock-step, and unlike the other things I do with my class**

  Students need to learn the stages of a retelling and the language associated with it — *predict, paraphrase, share and compare* and so on — so that they can confidently use it as a way of learning. Once the students were familiar with the stages, they seemed to use retelling as naturally and confidently as any other activity in their whole language classroom. As Jan Mansfield describes in her article on page 34, her students came to see it as a strategy for learning that they could use in whatever way they chose.

  The lock-step nature then may only be a problem while the teacher and students are learning to use the procedure; after a few retelling sessions, the stages come naturally.

- **My students aren't very enthusiastic readers and writers—so they see retelling as a real chore**

  A number of the project teachers experienced this problem at the beginning of the year and they tackled it in various ways. One teacher felt that her students' lack of interest in reading and writing was closely related to their lack of confidence as language users, so she made sure that she was very supportive, giving them plenty of positive feedback. She also tied the students' language program to their involvement in a Bicentennial electronic mail project which they felt was worthwhile. Retelling texts and tasks were chosen to support the project.

  Another teacher chose texts and negotiated topics that related directly to the students' interests and concerns.The students commented that they felt more involved and interested when they chose topics together with the teacher. He also made sure that retelling was not always done in the same way. A retelling from a short film was particularly successful for some of his students.

Another teacher found the key to improving students' attitudes to language activities was to change from working with the whole class to having the students work in small groups. In this way, discussion was fostered and the students took more responsibility for their own and their peers' involvement in the activity.

RETELLING WORKS BEST WHEN ...

- **Students know what they are doing and why**
  Discussing the role and purpose of the different steps in retelling helps students to evaluate how they learn and helps them to become better learners.

- **Students are used to working co-operatively**
  When students are used to working co-operatively, they are able to retell effectively. This is because they have already gained experience in discussing ideas openly and in responding sensitively to others' thoughts.

  Some of the project teachers found they had to help their students develop the skills and attitudes required for working together. The starting point for two teachers was to have students working in pairs, sharing their ideas orally, and reading and responding to each other's writing.

  The arrangement of the project teachers' classrooms reflected their concern that students should be able to work together effectively. Most of the teachers arranged the desks in clusters, so that students could easily move from working together to working on their own.

- **Students feel confident about taking risks**
  When students were relaxed and confident about taking risks they predicted extensively and imaginatively and teachers were able to find out a great deal about their linguistic resources and referential backgrounds. Confident students were also able to bring their own ideas and language into their retellings. For them, a good retelling was one in which they had been able to capture features they thought were important, in the way they liked.

  Students who were not confident tended to write very safe, narrow predictions, perhaps just using synonyms of the title words. They seemed bothered by the need to get things right and sometimes were extremely concerned to reproduce the exact appearance of the original texts.

- **Retelling is an integral part of the program, not an add-on**
  Even though the strategies of retelling are compatible with other classroom activities, when teachers first start to use it they often get the feel of it by using it as a self-contained activity which is added on to the other activities in their programs.

  As teachers and students become more familiar with the procedure they see opportunities for using retelling within their normal programs. For example, if the students are working with a particular form of writing, such as personal anecdotes, retelling could model the characteristics of that particular form. Again, if

students are working with a topic such as the human digestive system, retelling could be used to give students more information on the topic as well as more experience of specialist language and expository writing.

- **Texts are appropriate and of high quality**

  An appropriate length for a text is roughly 200—300 words. During the project some teachers successfully used longer narratives for retelling. However, long factual pieces or descriptive pieces often proved to be too demanding for students so that they were very dissatisfied with their retellings. When teachers had to choose texts on the basis of some criterion other than quality (to fit in with a current topic or theme, for example) they and their students often felt that the retelling was not successful.

- **All the stages of the retelling strategy are used**

  The project teachers learned by trial and error that they needed to use all the stages. The stages most vulnerable to omission initially were immersion and sharing and comparing. When there was little or no immersion, students went into the retelling ill-prepared and their ability to deal with the demands of the retelling task was undermined.

  Sharing and comparing is important because of the way it focuses students' attention on the text and also on their own ways of working with the text. The discussion among students about different readings of the text and different ways of retelling it, is particularly valuable for students. It develops a sense of themselves as writers who have options, as well as a sense of the ways texts are constructed.

- **Teachers have an understanding of how students learn language**

  The project teachers were quite emphatic about their need to have an understanding of how students learn language in order to be able to use retelling effectively within their language programs. With such an understanding they could create effective learning conditions, plan suitable activities and give useful feedback to students. The project teachers fostered their own learning through reading, discussion with other project teachers, informal contacts with other teachers, inter-school visits, and keeping journals.

  Dr Cambourne's explanation of the theory underpinning the retelling procedure, presented both through his visits to Tasmania and in documents such as *Rediscovering Natural Literacy Learning: Old Wine in a New Bottle* (see appendix), helped teachers to develop their understanding of language learning. The teachers also engaged in their own professional reading and some were also members of professional associations such as the Primary English Teachers Association, the Tasmanian Reading Association and the Tasmanian Association for the Teaching of English, all of which produce relevant journals, books or papers.

  The contact that project teachers had with each other proved valuable. As well as meeting together in statewide or regional groups, the teachers organised inter-school visits to find out more about each other's

ways of working. They adapted and used each other's ideas about appropriate texts and tasks. A highlight of the year was the visit by Hazel Brown who explained the way she worked with retelling, particularly her approach to evaluating written retellings (see page 14). After this session, teachers said they felt inspired to try some new approaches.

As well as these established means, teachers used their informal networks of school colleagues and teaching friends. They tapped into knowledge about appropriate reading material, developments in *Pathways* and ways of organising their classrooms for learning.

Some teachers kept journals. They recorded how they were using retelling, what they noticed about their students' responses and what the students themselves said about retelling. The journals provided an opportunity for reflection in a different way from the meetings and discussions.

For teachers who have not been involved in the project, many of these means are still available. The project teachers are happy to talk about the ways they worked with retelling. (Their names and schools are listed in the appendix.)

When first using retelling, a teacher can arrange with someone else on the staff to try it out too, so that there is someone to provide support. Teachers can check that their schools have membership of appropriate subject associations and can ask the librarian or subject leader to join if necessary.

TEACHERS' ARTICLES

RETELLING – A PERSONAL EXPLORATION

Venie Phillips
Woodbridge District High School

I am at a crossroad — a point of decision. I have been asked to write an article about retelling, and I'm just not sure how I feel about it. I'm ambivalent; I swing from excitement and enthusiasm to doubt and dejection. So, how to write an article? Let me try and share my thoughts with you and, in doing so, perhaps come to some resolution.

First I need to tell you about my theory on change and how people come to it. I believe that teachers are either *head down* or *hands up* in the way they take on new ideas. That is, some change their teaching practices after meeting and absorbing new theory (*head down*) and others change their theory after successfully trying new practices (*hands up*).

Teachers who change from the *hands up* are fired by a new activity, a new approach or new materials. The *hands up* teachers try these ideas by exploring, adapting, making them their own — and in doing so, modify their ideas about learning and teaching.

Teachers who change from the *head down* are those who are fired by a new principle, a new concept or a new way of looking at things. When such new ideas are taken on, the *head-downers* follow them through, exploring their practical implications and changing teaching practices where there is conflict. Both processes are valid. They reflect an openness of mind, a willingness to experiment and an ability to change. As for me, I'm a *head downer* and herein may lie my problem.

My introduction to retelling was through the *hands up* approach:

> Here's an exciting activity with loads of potential. Go away and try it out. Play with it, explore it and see what it can do.

I did so and was pleased with what emerged. But classroom time is finite and very precious. Every activity has to battle to keep its place in the limited hours and retelling just wasn't holding its own against those activities which had grown from my ideas and principles of teaching. The graft had just not taken properly. (The fault lies not in the graft, but in the tree!)

So, if I'm to resolve my dilemma I must go back to the tree — my philosophy of learning — and go from there.

Throughout my teaching life I have moved steadily towards the natural, commonsense beliefs about learning in which the child (not the teacher) is the centre of the process, is the initiator and controller, and the classroom

situation, as far as possible, parallels real-world situations.

Ah—is this the problem? Do I feel that retelling runs counter to this? That it's not a real-world activity? Most children like to read and be read to (they do it in school and out). Many children enjoy writing ('Can we have writing after recess? I wrote this poem last night.') and all children like to talk (to argue, discuss, invent stories and play game). But, retelling? I just can't imagine any of them asking to retell someone else's writing or to tell in words what someone else has told them through pictures or diagrams. But wait, what about their excited and unsolicited recountings of TV programs and playground incidents such as 'I said... and he said...?' Aren't they retellings? So, problem one resolved!

For language use to be valid it must be real and not just an exercise. It must serve some purpose of the child's. The purpose may be to provide delight or enjoyment (a good book), to achieve a desired outcome (a letter requesting something) or to share ideas or information (a story, a friendly chat).

Well, how does retelling fit here? To achieve a desired outcome is a real possibility. If children see writing as a worthwhile activity, see themselves as writers, then they will see mastery of the craft of writing as a desired outcome. Retelling certainly has that potential. By working with brief extracts, fine examples of the writer's craft, children can stand back from the writing product and focus on the skills and techniques that the writer has employed – a bit like Renaissance apprentice artists copying the work of the masters in order to appreciate and master the techniques! So, if the teacher can establish this feeling for writing in the class then the children will see a real purpose for retellings.

Now for the real-world learning situation bit. How does retelling fit into that? Do children, of their own volition, copy others and use others as models? Memories flood in ... my 7-year-old son, Brett, watching the 1972 Olympic swimming on TV, nodding and murmuring, 'Yes... that's it' as he mimicked the freestyle stroke of the competitors, ... and my daughter, Jenny, carefully applying my mascara, lipstick and eyeshadow to her 10-year-old face, turning her head to assess the effects, with a movement I recognised as my own. So, children **do** learn by emulating people they admire and want to be like. This **does** happen in the real world and children instinctively choose this powerful and effective strategy for achieving their desired outcomes. So, problem two resolved!

I'm sure more links between retelling and my beliefs about learning will emerge as I follow these thoughts through. But for now, this is enough for me. I have found a way of viewing retelling which is compatible with my philosophy of learning. The graft **should** take in time.

If you are a *head downer* you may need to make the same kind of voyage of exploration as I've just made. You, too, may need to argue it through with yourself in order to find out where, and how, retelling can fit into your scheme of things. Good luck! I have a feeling that you will find the journey well worthwhile.

... BUT THIS IS EASY

Pauline Camm
Huonville High School

When first introduced to retelling I was immediately struck by its usefulness to both students and teachers alike. After using re-

telling as a teaching and assessment strategy I am still of that belief. Generally, I found students learned from what they read, listened to and retold. Retelling also allowed me to observe students' language developments and plan for individual strengths and weaknesses. I noticed, after immersion, that students were able to replicate styles and forms of particular retellings. They were also able to use and understand the words and phrases within particular texts.

In this article I would like to explore the importance of immersion in retellings. Immersion must, I believe, be a vital feature of any whole-language classroom, particularly when teaching writing. Students cannot be expected to write in isolation, especially if they are asked to write in a particular style.

A year 8 English class, which consisted of fourteen boys and seven girls, was involved in the retelling program. The students' language expertise varied considerably. Few in the class were able to write confidently and well. I thought retelling would give them the extra help and would also assist my evaluation of individual needs.

The class had just established an electronic mail link with Brixham Community College, a school in the United Kingdom. The school was located in Brixham, a fishing village in Devon. The students in both schools were going to research and send each other information about their local areas. My students were excited about the contact and had spent much of their own time researching Brixham and its general area. Their findings were discussed in class and students were familiar with the area and school.

The first retelling was about Brixham and was titled, *A Fishing Village*. It was interesting to observe the initial reactions and predictions. Most students wrote that they expected the article to be about Brixham and because of the title and prior immersion, were able to predict some words and phrases. The retelling used was taken from a promotional feature of the town and was typical in style of most tourist brochures.

Student responses were interesting to observe. Most remembered the information from the article and were able to replicate its style.

The next sequence of work on Brixham was negotiated with students. It was decided that writing about Australia would be done both individually and in groups. Three groups were established and they produced packages on the local area, the school and the states of Australia. Group members were involved in conducting interviews, collating information and so on. Each student was also expected to present a personal package that would include a letter of introduction, a story written in the style of an aboriginal myth, a story set in Australia, and a tall tale.

Retellings were used to enhance students' awareness of the form and style of aboriginal myths and tall tales. Initially students were unsure, but after immersion and some oral and written retellings, they felt more confident. This was even more evident in their writing. The style of the students' myths and tall tales, including some of their phrases, was reminiscent of the texts used for retelling.

I began by talking about aboriginal myths and how they developed. Three myths were read, *The Origin of Fire*, *The Sun Woman and Moon Man* and *How the Sun Was Made*. During the discussion of these myths, many

students retold what they had read. Written retellings titled *High Tide and Low Tide* and *The Plover Man* followed. The influence of the previous immersion was obvious. The retellings demonstrated that the students were able to retain most, if not all, of the information and that they could also write in the same style. This was particularly evident when students wrote their own myths.

The writing process highlighted the influence of the two previous written retellings. Nearly all students began with phrasing like: *Long, long ago in the Dreamtime...* and *Many, many years ago when the world was young...* and ended with expressions like *This is why....*

Generally their writing showed a sequential development similar to that of the original retellings. Many words and phrases reappeared correctly spelt. It was interesting to observe the writing of one young boy, Michael, who always found writing difficult. He claimed that he could never think of anything to write and generally had little confidence in his own ability. This was not the case with his piece of writing which he called *How the Sun was Made*. He said that the task was much easier because he knew how to begin, what to write about, and how it should be written. He thought it was his best piece of writing all year.

A similar procedure was followed with writing a tall tale. A number were read and discussed and two retellings were written. The same 'linguistic spillover' appeared in the students' writing.

I believe retelling can be a worthwhile technique for teachers and students. If they are to use it well, teachers cannot ignore the importance of immersion and context because without these the end product is not as powerful.

RETELLING—A WORTHWHILE ACTIVITY?

Jan Mansfield
Ulverstone Primary School

It is my belief that one of the best indicators of an activity's worth is the children's response to it. I don't think that an activity can be totally successful unless the children take responsibility for their learning during it. In order for children to do so, they must feel that the task:

- has relevance for them
- is under their control
- is non-threatening
- can be successfully completed
- has some value.

The retelling process allows for these learning conditions to be met. Through this article I intend to demonstrate how children can take responsibility for retelling.

Evidence that the children find retelling a relevant and worthwhile activity occurred during a negotiated unit of work. Two boys chose retelling as one method of presenting to the rest of the class the work they had researched. One of the boys explained why they had chosen retelling:
'Retelling is a good way to learn new things and to remember things. I can also see how much they (the class) know after I have given my presentation.'

The other justified his use of retelling simply by stating:
'It's a good thing to do to learn things.'

The boys followed the basic retelling procedure of predicting from titles and sharing the predictions. One of them used taped information and the other had his information

typed out. Both boys asked the class to retell the information in written form. They ended their sessions with sharing the retellings and comparing them with the originals.

Another example of a child seeing the value of using retelling occurred during a unit of work which was based on the importance of the setting in a text. I had read examples of settings in various stories, and the children had written stories using different settings for different plots. One girl brought the book she was reading to me, enthusiastically read an extract which vividly described the setting for a mystery story and asked if we could use it for a retelling.

From this incident, I realised that she:

- recognised the value of retelling, in this case in relation to setting
- realised the relevance of retelling to our whole language program
- was confident in her ability to select a passage for retelling.

Children participated willingly and enthusiastically in the predicting and sharing stages, which both involve risk-taking. A class familiar with peer-editing will be quite happy to share their retellings and will respond positively to each other's work. Also, children who are encouraged to be open and honest with each other, and who are encouraged to experiment, will not be afraid of the prediction stage. Children who are aware of the purposes of retelling and who see the relevance of the process as part of their everyday work will use it — and in the process will take responsibility for their learning.

RETELLING—LEARNING ALL THE TIME

John Lowrie
Devonport High School

The past hour and three quarters have been spent meandering through my journal on retelling. I have been hoping that in taking this little stroll down memory lane (all of 15 months!) it just might help to give some direction and depth to what I want to write.

As one who had minimal English teaching training at the TCAE, most of my expertise in that subject has been gleaned from 'traditionalists' whom I encountered in the earlier years of my teaching. Subsequently I have been exposed to the likes of Australian Reading Association conferences, an occasional peep at a couple of texts on reading and writing, photocopying relevant snippets from P.E.N. (Primary English Notes) and through various in-service and school-based seminars on aspects of the teaching of English.

My involvement with the retelling project has brought me under three major influences. The first is an appreciation of the principles underlying *Pathways*. This document must be seen as the corner stone for my observations of children and for my subsequent planning of strategies to meet their needs. The second is the Learning Conditions model, identified by Dr Brian Cambourne, which dovetails nicely into the *Pathways'* framework. It is crucial to understand the preconditions for learning to occur — and the importance of immersion as central to the learning process. The third is the use of retelling as a classroom strategy which helps to mesh the theory of the learning model and the framework of *Pathways* as a tool for observation

and planning. At a practical level then, retelling has much to offer.

It is important **not** to see retelling as an orthodoxy — there is not just one way of doing it.

I recall when coming away from our first retelling meeting in Hobart in 1986, that it was very much a case of believing there was a particular style of doing a retelling, especially if you wished to give any validity to the product of the retellings as the basis for evaluation.

Since those early days, I would consider my classes to have experienced the gamut of permutations of retelling. I have found that there are no limitations on how retelling should be used, as long as its value as a tool for interaction and evaluation is emphasised.

In the classroom I have attempted to vary my management techniques so that retelling is done with individuals, small groups, and the whole class. My two main purposes when using retelling are to create an atmosphere where students have a sense of ownership, and to use it as a strategy for observation and evaluation.

At present, I am making more use of varied media in choosing texts for retelling. This helps me to make retelling part of my normal classroom practice with years 7 and 10 English and social science classes. By varying size groupings, it is possible to observe the development of students' social skills as they do their retellings.

The two matrices (below) that have been developed as assessment records for analysing retellings — oral and written — add to the teacher's diagnostic armoury. Both are really useful, especially for me, coming in on a whole new approach to assessing students' literacy.

I found them particularly useful in the early stages of feeling your way with retelling. As I've managed to get myself organised in planning programs with classes, I've come back to *Pathways* in sequencing activities and evaluating what students do. I'm not saying *Pathways* is better than the matrices (or am I?), it is more a matter of what the teacher feels comfortable with. For me, *Pathways* has certainly helped to make the connections between using retelling in my teaching and evaluation.

It certainly is a case of learning all the time....!

Matrix 1: Evaluation (written retelling)

Text	Meaning	Structure	Conventions	Cognitive Abilities
	• ideas • clarity • relevance to form/ purpose of writing	• organisation of writing • unity between parts and whole • sequence, etc.	• spelling • usage • punctuation • appropriate vocab	• ability to – predict – infer – hypothesise – generalise
Jan				

Matrix 2: Evaluation (oral retelling)

Text	Meaning	Structure	Conventions	Cognitive Abilities
	• ideas • clarity • originality	• sequence of ideas, events • repetition/self-correction	• appropriate, eg. for questions, conversation etc. • clarity • diction	• tense, plurals etc • word complexity • appropriate to form
Jan				

RETELLING—A CLASSROOM STRATEGY

Glenda Russell and Malcolm Orr
Bridgewater Primary School

To demonstrate one of the many ways of using retelling we feel it would be helpful to describe a particular retelling taken with a year 6 class.

Two students from this class had been selected to accompany the computer teacher to England as part of the DATEM project. The purpose of the trip was to see the re-enactment of the departure of the First Fleet from Portsmouth and to relay messages to a network of schools in Tasmania via computer—a very exciting first for primary education.

Extending over a period of several weeks, the children in class had been immersed in the following:

- English literature, for example, the works of Charles Dickens, the Bronte sisters, Monica Dickens and Beatrix Potter
- Australian history of the 18th and 19th centuries
- means of transport used during the 18th century
- living conditions in England during the 18th century
- computer links and exchanges with a school in Devon
- the geographical relationship between England and Australia.

For three weeks the children had read and heard about the DATEM trip through the media as well as via electronic mail.

The children were asked to read a newspaper report on the re-enactment of the departure of the First Fleet and then to retell it from the point of view of a journalist present at Portsmouth who was reporting back to Tasmania. By involving the children in this activity it was hoped to answer the following questions:

- after being immersed in it, could the children now write in the style of a newspaper report?
- could the children distinguish between writing reports and writing fiction?
- how much of the three weeks of immersion could they recall and use?

Description of the Retelling Session

- Predicting content from the title (writing time 3–4 minutes)
  Once the title, *Students in Re-enactment Bid*, was displayed, the children became quite excited, because they recognised it as something familiar.

- Sharing predictions (time 3–4 minutes)
  At this point, our belief that immersion is a very necessary pre-requisite for retellings was reaffirmed. When comparing predictions, the children showed they already knew a great deal about this subject; although one child, who had been absent on several occasions over the previous three weeks, predicted that the headlines referred to a bunch of kids having to do their work all over again!

- Predicting words (eight or ten words sufficient).This was done with the whole class. The following words were suggested – *voyage, Bicentenary, masts, vessels, convicts, supplies, historic, unique, eventful.* The appropriateness of the vocabulary again indicates the value of immersion.

- Discussing differences in reporting actual events compared with writing fictional stories (5–10 minutes) and reading the newspaper report (5–6 minutes)
  The characteristics of reports that were discussed included the presentation of correct and factual information, an interesting writing style to attract audience attention, and care with conventions and presentation. The text was then read aloud, after which the children re-read it and discussed the content and the writing style. These were some of the children's comments:
  'You must give facts.'
  'Be careful to tell it as you see it.'
  'Make it interesting or people won't bother to read it.'
  'Write as if you are there watching it.'
  'Tell it as if you're talking to blind people.'
  'Use good words or it will be boring.'

- Writing retelling as if reporting for a newspaper from the actual scene (15–20 minutes)
  Most children wrote a reasonable account of events. We noted quite early that many children needed to be aware of the importance of sequence in reporting and of keeping to the topic. We were impressed by the way the children attempted to use correct terminology, such as *Australian Associated Press, Aussat Satellite, fleet of ships, tall masts, DATEM Project,* and *Tasnet.*

- Sharing and comparing in pairs (10 minutes) and discussing retellings with the whole class (5+ minutes)
  During the discussion time the children made several references to knowledge they had acquired over previous weeks. They now had so much experience of retelling that they felt comfortable about comparing similarities and differences in writing styles and content. In fact, many children enjoyed the sharing time most of all. One child was heard to say that he now tried much harder with the written retelling because it made the sharing time more interesting and helpful.

Several references were made to the classroom environment. For example, the tall ships in the text were compared with paintings and models of sailing ships in the classroom. References were also made to the electronic mail reports they had read. One child felt that the DATEM reports from the children were more interesting than the newspaper reports because newspaper reports were mainly for adult readers while the DATEM reports were written by children for children. Another child said that the DATEM reports contained amusing little incidents which newspaper reporters do not consider important and another commented on how easy it would be to make false reports or include incorrect statements in order to gain audience attention.

After our experiences, we believe the possibilities for retelling are endless and that the strategy could be used in any subject area for many different purposes.

We have noted a 'linguistic spillover' from retelling to other areas such as vocabulary, general knowledge, writing style, punctuation and spelling. When this spillover occurs, then retelling can certainly be seen as a valuable learning activity with lasting effect on overall language development.

IT'S NOT JUST A MATTER OF PUSHING THE RIGHT BUTTON

Terry Field
Ringaroom Primary School

Some time ago my year 5/6 was engaged in the production of a video about the Ringarooma district where we live. This activity was initiated by one of my pupils whose mother was travelling to Ireland to visit her family after an absence of ten years. She agreed to take the video to an Irish primary school near Ennislin where our school hoped to develop a sister-school relationship.

My class and I decided we would incorporate the video production into our program of work. Naturally the children had to be taught how to use the video camera as they were going to produce the film and edit it. I couldn't have thought of a better way than to use retelling—a procedure, I believe, that should be part of the total language process across the curriculum.

I had the instruction sheet for using the video camera copied for every child to read. I asked the children to retell the instructions. In this case the retelling was a whole-class activity although it could have been arranged just as easily as a group activity or one set up as a learning centre. The purpose of the retelling was to give me a clear picture of the children's understanding of the instructions. Their understanding, I hoped, would then be applied to the actual production of the video.

During the proceedings there was a lot of talk. The children were excited because none of them had used a video camera before. I asked the children for their comments. Kelvin, a talkative class member whose mother was the parent actually travelling to Ireland, yelled out:

'Mr Field!'
'Yes, Kelvin?'
'Well, Mr Field, its not just a matter of pushing the right button is it?'

It's not a matter either of presenting to children retellings that are written in the same genre all the time. We must vary the examples. The purpose behind this exercise was very practical. I did not want the video camera damaged and I did want a good video production. The fact that the camera was returned to the Curriculum Resources Section in one piece says a great deal too!

Yes, it certainly was not only a matter of pushing the right button — it is also a matter of choosing the right retelling at the right time and in the right context.

RETELLING A RETELLING

Larry Watson
Invermay Primary School

For one retelling session I used an article on whaling in Tasmania with my year 6 to give them some information about early Tasmania and to provide a stimulus for further reading and discussion. This tied in with a general theme, *Our Past*, in social studies. By using this text I wanted to obtain some information about how well my students understood and responded to expository writing.

The students had been reading a variety of texts about Australian history and after some class discussions, they had a reasonably

good understanding of the theme. I had read to them *Farewell to Old England Forever*, a traditional ballad illustrated by V.A. Ling, and Alan Boardman's *Eureka Stockade*, as well as a number of related short stories. We had also discussed and sketched items from a classroom display.

After this immersion we went into the retelling session. The following are a few of the words the children predicted — *sea, hunted, boat, man, people, food, fish, industry, company , sell, cooking, kill, harpoon, stern, port, there she blows, captain, bo'sun, Tasman Sea, history progress* and *Australia.*

The text contained a great deal of factual information – too much, in fact, for most of the children in the class. They tended to summarise some of the main ideas from the extract and remembered very few of the actual facts contained in the passage.

The text provided a stimulus for the children to talk about whales, whaling and early Tasmania. One student told us that he had recently read about whales being in the Derwent River this year; another mentioned seeing a TV news report on whales in Tasmania; another talked about killer whales beaching themselves; another showed us a book with a picture of Moby Dick; and so on.

This particular retelling session was used to give the students information and to help me assess the students' language development. I have, of course, used other retelling sessions for different teaching purposes.

After doing a number of retellings and observing students, I have found that the procedure has endless possibilities for evaluation and for helping students to learn.

CONFESSIONS OF A BORN–AGAIN RETELLER

Joan Loudon
Kingston High School

Most of the stories we tell ourselves and others are not new. They are, of course, retellings. While in the secondary school we have valued story in written text, in oral exchange, in drama, and in pictures and film, we tend not to have valued what might be considered 'straight' retellings. We have looked at retelling as only an elementary form of recall, and used other activities, themselves quite legitimate, as responses to stories.

In this paper, I will describe the perceptions I have built up about the uses of retelling, my methods of evaluation and how I have made retelling an intrinsic part of my general program.

When our group was first introduced to the technique of retelling as developed by Hazel Brown and Brian Cambourne, it was as a diagnostic approach to testing comprehension, and thus reading. It had the advantage of being based on a whole-language philosophy which more traditional tests are not.

After carrying out a number of retellings with mixed ability classes across the range from years 7 to 10, and deliberately seeking, in the early stages, some material that was very difficult, I am satisfied that retelling is a valuable tool for checking comprehension.

I had a personal experience of this in a slightly different way at the State Conference of the Tasmanian Association for the Teaching of English in 1987, when John Mayher and Nancy Lester (authors of *Learning to*

Write, Writing to Learn 1983) conducted a workshop. We were given a piece of difficult material from a professional journal of some sort. I believed I had understood it. Then we were presented with a multiple choice test. I had great difficulty deciding on my answers and, in the end, made them all half guesses. I had no confidence that I had correctly answered any. My score was six out of ten.

Then we were asked to write a connected piece about the original. I was easily able to do this form of retelling, telling myself the story as I went. I found that I had done justice to the original when I compared the two. I knew I had understood the piece, yet I could not perform well on the test. My connected writing showed that I had been right.

In checking for comprehension in the classroom I have not noticed any pitfalls in using retelling as the measure. In ordinary tests of comprehension, questions can be correctly answered without real understanding of the text. I recall an anecdote about children correctly answering 'coke' as a part of the process of steelmaking, while thinking that it meant the well-known drink.

Cloze passages have also proved their usefulness as tests of comprehension. The advantage that retelling has over this technique is that it offers more than just comprehension.

It was obvious from later meetings with Dr Brian Cambourne that he saw another use, perhaps a more important one for retelling. This was the transfer of good models from the text of the original into the hands, and subsequently into the writing repertoire, of the reteller.

The good writers in classes are also the good readers. The writing of good, prolific readers is marked by phrases they are unlikely to have invented themselves and by an ability to imagine and to project. These features are largely absent from the writing of the reluctant and infrequent readers. An outside researcher would have difficulty in picking this up, but it is something that the students' regular teacher sees readily. While being aware of this, I have been able to observe from the earliest work that there is quite a definite transfer of language patterns and registers and the use of words, even ideas, from retelling texts not only in the retellings themselves, but in original work some time later.

The most reluctant reader in the project class (a boy who seemed unable to concentrate for more than a couple of minutes at a time, but who was not really a very weak reader) showed his lack of reading experience most markedly in his writing. Even with a great deal of conferencing, he could not invest a narrative with any sort of 'clothing'. Making him a regular reader may take time, on the other hand, it may never happen. Through retelling, perhaps, we could effect some improvement in his writing. At least he would have some experience of walking in another writer's shoes.

When evaluating written retellings, I have developed a procedure that is deliberately simple because there is not enough time to be otherwise. When I return the scripts to the class they contain no extensive written feedback but there is oral discussion about any special strengths or weaknesses.

My method of evaluation and recording takes two forms. Any special idiosyncratic feature or problem of a student's work is written out in the page in my class book reserved for that student. In the grid record section of the book

I allot a column for recall and a column for language. If the retelling is generally satisfactory I merely tick the space next to that student's name in the recall column. If it is especially good, I write 'VG', if obviously the passage has not been understood I write 'P' for poor. In evaluating the language aspect I look for successful matching of style and tone with the original and use the same symbols to record my impressions as I did with the recall column.

I have tried to make the retellings an intrinsic part of my general program. When I am reading a novel with the class, I use part of it for retelling. This means there is no need for all the preliminary processes of immersion and prediction to be used every time, as the previous reading of earlier passages in the book can serve as the immersion step. Not only is comprehension checked, but so also is the sense of the atmosphere and tensions of the chapter. This practice can be further extended by asking for the retelling to be done from the point of view of a different character in the book—a strategy we have employed in English classes for many years now, calling it 'creative response' or 'dependent authorship'. It is only now obvious to us that it is a form of retelling.

When my year 7 pupils were writing their own novel I deliberately chose pieces for retelling that might serve as models for certain aspects of the writing. Thus there was a piece full of spooky atmosphere and suspense. I intended to do some retellings which focused on character, aspects of surprise and conversation, but the students needed more time than I had allowed for the writing of their novels.

I further integrated retelling in my most recent piece of work. It centered on a class drama involving a supposedly haunted house that the class, in various roles, had undertaken to investigate. First I chose a retelling text about a deserted house. This was done with all the usual routine of immersion, and the sharing and comparing afterwards. Then the class wrote an original composition on the topic. After this we embarked upon the drama work. The idea of the retelling was to open up ideas about deserted houses and then to engage children in a more substantial process.

This year, because of the strictures of time, I have concentrated on the class chosen for the project. Next year I look forward to using the technique extensively with senior classes as well. Because of the opportunities this will offer, I plan to develop more uses and strategies for this very valuable tool.

APPENDIX

REDISCOVERING NATURAL LITERACY LEARNING

Old wine in a new bottle

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Paper presented at ESL Conference Programme
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(Reprinted with permission)

I'm going to begin this session by asking you all to answer, as honestly as possible, three questions. Please record your answers on a spare sheet of paper.

Here are the three questions:

i) Do you like writing? (Yes/No)
ii) How many quarto pages of writing would you do voluntarily each day? (a number)
iii) Are you good at writing? (Yes/No)

Over the last five years I've put these questions to nearly one thousand incoming year one tertiary students, as well as five hundred teachers and about the same number of parents. I've now stopped collecting such data because the results have been depressingly similar each time I conduct the experiment. If I repeated the experiment with next year's intake, I could predict with a high degree of accuracy what the results would be, viz:

Over 90% of the respondents would answer 'No, None, No.'

'No, I don't like writing.'
'None, *I never write unless* it's absolutely necessary.'
'No, I'm not a good writer.'

As this pattern has continually occurred in the past I feel certain it would recur should I continue the experiments.

This pattern of responses both depresses and worries me. It **depresses** me because the major proportion of the respondents represent what could be called the successes of the school system; ie. those who've passed the HSC and gained admission to tertiary education. I've often wondered how those who don't come to University would respond to the same three questions. My guess is that there would not be much difference.

The results **worry** me because they demonstrate that the majority of the graduates of our school system are extremely negative about the act of writing, and about themselves as writers. It would be fair to say that they see writing as an activity to be engaged in only when necessary; as a barrier to be negotiated for examination purposes, having little other utility. In short they are alienated from the writing act.

This alienation is reflected in numerous superficial ways which many of my colleagues are quick to highlight; unconventional spelling, non-standard grammar, poor organisational logic, and so on. Letters and comments such as these are frequent occurrences in tertiary circles.

Pursuit of mediocrity

Your article on June 28 on falling standards in American education really struck home.

The previous afternoon I had marked an essay from a second-year university student which included these gems: *the profit Mohammed; the sole of the Indonesian people; a plausable title; Javanese forklore; stable government illuded them; principals* instead of *principles* (seven times in two paragraphs); etc. ad nauseam.

Anyone teaching in universities will have become inured to reading large quantities of amazing junk. Many, many students know and care nothing of grammar. They can't spell and can't be bothered trying. More importantly, their formal semi-literacy means they are incapable of expressing whatever thoughts they have, and this after 12 years of schooling.

Your article rightly pointed to the effects of levelling-down attitudes. These deny not only intellectual excellence but also special capacities. The development of individual talents, which should begin in pre-school, is made subordinate to the pursuit of homogenous mediocrity.

Any society which, as a matter of policy, ignores exceptional abilities (in any field) and suppresses exceptional people does not deserve to survive.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that children who are academically inclined are getting a raw deal in Australian Schools.

These weaknesses, in my opinion, are superficial symptoms of a deeper malaise, a malaise characterised by a lack of commitment to the act of writing, a lack of conviction that it's worth doing, a lack of confidence that it is 'do-able' by most students, and a lack of understanding of the processes that need to be controlled in order to write.

This alienation worries me, not because of any missed opportunities to produce another Shakespeare or Hemingway. On the contrary. It's a mistake to believe that the end result of writing instruction should be to produce great authors with highly developed, finely tuned skills of communication. While the communicative function of writing is extremely important and needs to be given high priority, I don't believe it's the prime reason for teaching writing.

There is a more important reason for teaching writing, and producing school graduates who feel positive about it, and about themselves as writers. It is this: Writing is th**e most potent tool of learning and thinking that the human race has available to it.** We need to write in order to find out what we think and in order to shape our learning. The evidence from cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics is quite conclusive: writing is a highly complex act which depends upon analysis and synthesis at many different levels of thinking. I have a strong conviction that sustained engagement with the written form of the language actually changes us cognitively. When we construct meaning from a text which someone else has written, or construct a text for someone to read, we engage in cognitive behaviour which is qualitatively different from making meanings using the oral form of the language. Among other things the written form of the language enables very complex thoughts to be 'laid out', inspected, extended, modified, reworked, in ways that the oral form can't quite manage. Continuous and sustained engagement with the written mode of language both enables and coerces a kind of thinking which is unique. It's no fluke that those societies which discovered a writing system have developed quite differently from those which have not.

This alienation is not restricted to the act of writing. There are lots of alienated readers arriving at University too. One of my colleagues has coined the term the *A-literate* reader (A is shorthand for alienated) – the student who in terms of measured reading ability, using a standardised test, can read, but who displays a great deal of reluctance to do so: this is the student who tries to complete a written assignment by reading a book which answers the question, who complains

when you suggest that it may be beneficial to gather information for the assignment from a number of books. ('You mean I gotta read two books?') This is the student who tells me that she reads the newspaper and the Woman's Weekly every day without any trouble, but every time she opens the textbook I've set, she finds herself 'falling asleep'.

This alienation has been confirmed by research.

Book? A thing you read only at school.

Most Australian primary and secondary school pupils can read well but more than 40 per cent of students in year 11 read no books at all outside school hours.

Books are boring, comics are old hat. They much prefer to read magazines.

These are some of the findings of a four year national study of children's reading habits.

It's no use blaming television. Children classified by their teachers as 'good readers' watch as much TV as those who avoid books and libraries.

According to the study, the problem is more likely to be in the way children are taught to read and to perceive books. Many pupils think the books stocked by their school libraries are not very exciting.

The study, *Children's Choice*, found that only a very small number of students could not read at all.

But 51 per cent of boys in year 11 and 35 per cent of girls did not read any books outside of school compared with 26 per cent of boys in year 5 and 17 per cent of girls.

The study involved academics from several colleges of advanced education and universities, including Deakin, Sydney and James Cook.

The head of the research team, Ms Rhonda Bunbury, said teachers across Australia appeared to be mostly concerned with fostering in their pupils the basic reading and writing skills.

Most of the class time, at all levels, was occupied with basic literacy (reading and writing) and language meaning (such as pronunciation) instruction. This, she said, was probably the result of community pressure in recent years to get back to basics.

Such an emphasis on basic skills meant that teachers tended to undervalue, and in some cases ignore, the skills involved in oral expression, especially in the last year of primary school and in early secondary school.

The use of oral language skills, involving such activities as conversation between individual pupils and teachers, small group discussion, oral reading and story telling by the teacher, declined considerably as students progressed through the grades.

Furthermore, Ms Bunbury said, students were not being taught to read for pleasure.

'They associate reading outside school with class work, especially those in Year 11 who are at a stage when many of the subjects taught at school are seen as irrelevant,' she said.

Ms Bunbury said that magazines were popular with children partly because the magazine market was so specialised. Children who enjoyed riding BMX bicycles, for instance, could buy magazines which dealt almost exclusively with them.

Surprisingly, the popularity of comic books had declined, probably because many children now preferred to watch action adventure or comedy show on television where gratification was more immediate.

Ms Bunbury said that, while students and teachers often blamed television for the decline

in reading among school children, the evidence compiled by the study team suggested that television was not the main competitor.

A more likely reason was the fact that few parents were encouraging their children to read because they (the parents) were not keen readers and could not serve as role models.

(*Sydney Morning Herald* 16 August 1985)

The message in this research is that there are many children who are being so alienated from the act of reading, that once they escape the four walls of the classroom, they avoid engagement with texts that make any demands on them.

Herein lies the nub of my concern. We are not producing students who know how to use writing and/or reading as tools of thinking and learning; who turn readily to them as means of problem identification and problem solving, who know how their power can be tapped to facilitate thinking and enable learning to occur, who understand them and can control them to suit their learning goals.

I've often asked myself, 'Why?' Why after twelve years of schooling in which writing is given high priority by sincerely motivated and dedicated teachers do so few students have it under control? Why do they regard it as a necessary evil, to be avoided except when absolutely unavoidable? Why do they regard themselves as so inadequate at it? Why do they find reading anything which makes demands on them as boring?

A whole range of explanations have been offered. They can be reduced to two broad categories of explanation.

i) The total act of literacy (especially writing) is such a cognitively complex task to learn to control, that at best we can expect only a small, highly talented percentage of the school population to come to grips with it.

ii) Learning how to become literate is a natural language learning enterprise which should be easy and painless, but something goes terribly wrong in its learning.

As a consequence of carefully observing and documenting how reading and writing are taught and learned (or not learned), I've come to the conclusion that the second explanation has the most validity; ie. learning to read and write (which includes learning how to spell, punctuate, in short, learning to become literate) is a natural learning enterprise which should be learnable with a high degree of success, but something goes terribly wrong with the process.

Here's what I think has gone wrong: we've lost sight of two extremely important facts:

i) The oral and written forms of the language are only superficially different.

ii) Learning how to talk using the language system of the culture into which one has been born is a stunning intellectual achievement, almost universally successful, extremely rapid, usually effortless, painless, and durable (in the sense that once having mastered it, those who've learnt it continue to use it and develop it).

I will elaborate on each of these points and then draw some conclusions about learning to be literate.

Oral/written forms superficially different

By superficially different I do not mean trivially different. I'm using superficial in the sense of 'on the surface', not in the sense of unimportant. Of course the two modes of language are different in many complex and interesting ways. Of course the two require different kinds of knowledge which learners must acquire in order to operate with them; of course there are certain aspects of the use of the written mode which require specific knowledge which can't be carried over from the oral mode (and vice-versa).

However, in terms of how the brain processes them, at the deep levels of production and comprehension, there is no difference of great moment. Reading, writing, speaking, listening are simply different manifestations of the same vital human function, the mind's effort to create meaning. The fact that listening and speaking are tied to the production and/or reception of patterned sequences of sound, while reading and writing are tied to the reception/ production of graphic marks is irrelevant in terms of how the brain goes about creating meaning with them. In terms of reception, once past the eye or ear the light/sound waves which set the process of meaning creation in action are the same. The same processes are involved; the same neural machinery is involved. With respect to the production of meaning, (speaking, writing), the texts which are created for others to hear or read originate in the same parts of the cerebral cortex, traverse the neural pathways in the same ways before the organs of production (tongue, hand) go into action. While the ease with which the organs of production can be controlled may differ (speaking is easier than writing), this difference is also a superficial one.

These are extremely important notions, for the implication is that if the brain processes these modes of language in the same way it can also learn to process them in the same way, **if the same conditions of learning are allowed to operate.** Please keep this notion in mind, for I intend to return to it later.

Learning to talk: A stunning intellectual achievement

Learning to talk the language of the culture into which we're born is such a successful, easy, painless task, which occurs with such monotonous regularity and success that we take it for granted and overlook the enormity of the task which is achieved by each normal infant which is (or ever has been) born. What is it that has to be learned in order to learn one's language? Literally thousands of conventions, ie. arbitrarily agreed upon ways of responding with respect to signs. Each language spoken on earth today (some three to four thousand) comprises unique, arbitrary, sets of signs, and rules for combining those signs to create meanings. These conventions have no inherent rightness or logic to them, just as driving on the left or right hand side of the road has no intrinsic rightness or logic to it. Yet each language is an amazingly complex cultural artifact, comprising incredibly complicated sets of sounds, words, and rules for combining them, with equally numerous and complex systems for using them for different social, personal, and cognitive purposes. All of this complexity must be learned by the individual members of each language community.

One gets an inkling of just how complex a system a language is when one tries to map the grammatical rules that a native speaker of English must implicitly know when he can use, say, the reflexive system of English (I wash myself, you wash yourself, and not I wash himself etc.) as I once had to do in a course in elementary linguistics. The rules which describe how reflexives are used represent one tiny little segment of all the knowledge that speakers of English come to learn and control. Yet they are incredibly complex and detailed. Human languages are truly the most deviously complicated systems, the full complexity of which we may never come to completely understand. Yet little children, with extremely immature brains, have been learning them successfully for thousands of years. What's more, they've got 90% or more of these very complex systems under control by the time they're five or six years of age. How could learning to control the written form of language be considered any more difficult, complex or demanding?

How do they do it? Neurolinguists will tell you that they do it because they're human. The Director of the Universe has designed us with a nervous system that is specially programmed to learn language. No other species on earth is capable of learning a language to the same degree. But there's more to it than merely being neurologically designed to learn language. This potential for language needs certain conditions to prevail be-

fore it can be realised. If we could identify what these conditions are we can ask two important questions, viz:

- Are they typically applied when children are supposed to learn literacy, especially writing? If not,
- Can they be applied to the learning of literacy?

In what follows I intend to explore what these conditions might be and to assess their relevance for the teaching and learning of writing.

Learning to talk: Conditions that made it successful

Newly born members of any society have no foreknowledge of the language culture into which they're born. If they are to become full members of the society they are faced with the task of working out how to make meaning, using the same language conventions that the rest of the community uses. As stated above, there are literally thousands of items of knowledge about the phonemic, morpho-phonemic, grammatical, pragmatic dimensions of language which must be learned. This is a daunting task, but fortunately, over the millenia a pedagogy has been developed that maximises the probability that the task will be successfully completed by the overwhelming majority of most members of the community. This pedagogy is one which is synomorphic with the contexts in which the learning takes place; ie. it fits in with the social, physical, emotional parameters of what can be loosely called the family unit. Although the precise nature of what could be called the family unit differs from culture to culture, and from age to age in history, there are certain core features which do not seem to have changed. For example the young learners are always in close proximity to proficient users of the language; there is always among the experts (ie. the proficient users of the language) at least one with whom the learner forms a significant bond, but more often there is a range of experts (ie. speakers of the language) with whom bonds can be formed, (a community of user-experts). Within this framework there are certain processes that enable the task of learning the language to occur.

My intention is to briefly elaborate on each of these processes.

Immersion

From the moment they are born young language-learners are saturated in the medium they are expected to learn. The older members of the culture, the language experts, make available to the new members of the society thousands upon thousands of examples of the medium. For most of their waking time infants are within hearing distance of others using what it is that they are expected to learn. Other members of the community either talk at them, or are talking around them. Before the new arrivals are probably aware of what is going on around them, they are being exposed to the sounds, rhythms, cadences, of what it is they have to ultimately learn. It is important to understand that what it is that does saturate them, that is available, in which they are immersed, is **always whole,** usually **meaningful,** and in a context which makes sense, or from which sense can be construed.

Demonstration

Demonstrations can take two forms, artifacts or actions. Father asking at the breakfast table 'Will you pass the butter please?' and the subsequent passing of the butter is not only a demonstration of what that particular sequence of sound means, but is also a demonstration of what language can be used for, how it functions, how it can be tied to action, and so on. Young learners receive literally millions of demonstrations of what the spoken form of the language means, does, sounds like, can be used for, and so on. These demonstrations are the raw data that these learners must use in order to tease out how the language that they have to learn is structured. I've come to believe that demonstrations are the raw materials of most learning, not only language learning. Potential bike riders need demonstrations of how a bike is ridden before they can begin to learn bike riding; the same applies to shoelace tying, singing, read-

ing, writing. A book is an artifact which is also a demonstration of what a book is, what print is, how words are spelt, how texts are structured. Demonstrations are necessary conditions for learning to occur. Without them learning will not occur. However, while **necessary** conditions, they are not **sufficient.** Before learning can occur, a process which Smith labels 'engagement' must occur (Smith, 1981).

Some comments on the notion of engagement

Learners are exposed to thousands of demonstrations each waking moment of their lives which merely wash over them and are ignored. Learning fails to occur. Learners will only engage with a demonstration under certain conditions. Among other things, before engagement occurs learners need to be convinced of the following:

- That any demonstration they witness is potentially 'doable' *or* 'owner-able' *by* them; they must see themselves as potential talkers, bike riders, writers, or whatever.
- They must be convinced that emulating the demonstration they've witnessed will further the purposes of their lives
- They must feel safe that attempting to emulate the demonstration will not lead to any unpleasant consequences should they fail.

What leads learners to be convinced of the wisdom of engaging with any particular demonstration or set of demonstrations? I believe that the notion of **expectations** has something to do with it.

Expectation

Expectation is a multi-layered concept. In one sense it refers to the expectations that the learner himself holds about himself as a learner. As hinted above, he must believe that what he is setting out to learn is learnable, by him. Smith has argued that young learners actually believe they are capable of learning anything until they're told otherwise (Smith, 1981). In another sense it refers to the expectations that significant others communicate to learners. If those to whom the learner is bonded behave in ways that communicate to him that certain kinds of learning are expected then that learning usually takes place. (Try asking the parents of a new born child whether they expect it to learn to talk. See what kind of response you get.) Expectations are subtle but powerful coercers of behaviour. The research literature is replete with examples of the way that the expectations of significant others influence the learning behaviour of learners. Young learner-talkers receive very clear indications that they are expected to learn to talk and that they are capable of doing it.

Ditto for learning to walk. Never are they given any expectations that it is too difficult, or beyond their capabilities. With respect to activities other than talking, expectations can work against learning. For example in our culture there is an expectation that swimming is dangerous, difficult, and beyond young children. Consequently about half the population of young children do not learn to swim at state organised swimming lessons. On the other hand, how many teenagers expect to learn to drive? How many fail to do so?

Responsibility

When learning to talk, learner-talkers are left to decide (or take responsibility for) which particular convention or set of conventions they will attend to and subsequently internalise into their repertoires. Their tutors don't try to decide upon or sequence what the learner should learn. Instead they give off very strong expectations that the task will ultimately be completed. They also continue both to provide high saturation and to give meaningful demonstrations. However the learner him or herself is left to decide just what part of the total task will be internalised at any one time.

In order to understand this notion one must view language in a particular way, viz. as a network of interlocking systems, all of which operate simultaneously.

Atwell, (1983) describes this network with an effective metaphor. Oral language, Atwell says, has an inner core of meaning which is wrapped in

an outer layer of grammar, which is in turn sheathed by a phonemic system, all of which occur within a context. Any natural language act cuts across all these systems.

Ultimately the learner must come to know all the linguistic and socio-linguistic systems. The significant others in his environment give off very strong expectations that full learning will occur eventually. Usually the vast majority of learners respond, and full learning **does** occur. When a learner engages with a demonstration, the tutor has no way of knowing which layer or layers will be attended to, engaged with and ultimately learned. Will the learner hook into the phonemic rules from this demonstration or perhaps the grammatical conventions? Then again there are the sociolinguistic rules of behaviour. All the tutor is certain of is that ultimately, all will be learned. What is important is that what is demonstrated, what is available to be immersed in, is always a **whole** slice of the 'language pie', with all of the systems present. While the tutor has the responsibility for supplying the demonstrations, and for providing the climate of expectation etc., the learner has two levels of responsibility; ultimately to become proficient in the total act, but for the moment, (currently) to choose the most relevant, most useful, aspect, of any demonstration with which to engage. It's my belief that once we take this responsibility away, by pre-determining which layer a child should or can learn, and then isolating it from the others, we begin to complicate the process of learning by decontextualising and fragmenting the language acts. We also begin to trivialise language.

Approximations

When learning to talk, learner-talkers are not expected to wait until they have **all** the systems and sub-systems of language fully intact before they're allowed to use it. If this were the case they would not begin to produce audible speech until they were nine or ten years of age at the earliest (Carol Chomsky found some linguistic structures which are typically not under control until at about this age [Chomsky 1968]). Young learner-talkers are expected to have-a-go, ie. to attempt to emulate what is being demonstrated, and their childish attempts are enthusiastically, warmly, often joyously, received. There is no expectation that fully developed, 'correct' (ie. totally conventional) adult forms will be produced. In short, 'baby-talk' is expected, warmly received and treated as a legitimate, relevant, meaningful and useful contribution to the context. Nor is any anxiety displayed about the unconventional forms which proliferate in baby-talk; if any direct intervention is given, it is given only when the teacher-adult (parent) thinks the truth value of what the learner-talker is trying to say is compromised. (The learner points to a truck and says 'Dat **car**'.) Very rarely is direct instruction on a particular 'error' given. ['You omitted the verb to be ('is') and the indefinite article ('a'), say after me 'Dat **is a** car'.] Futhermore there is no anxiety that the immature attempts to model the adult form will become permanently fixed characteristics of the learner's repertoire. On the contrary, those who are responsible for the learner's language development know and expect the immature forms to drop out and be replaced by conventional forms. And they do, and have been doing so for as long as children have been learning to talk.

This willingness to accept approximations is absolutely essential to the processes which accompany language learning. In fact it sets in motion the hypothesis-testing-modify hypothesis-test again, etc. cycle which characterises all natural learning. Modification of hypothesis can only occur, if as a consequence of testing the hypothesis, some unrest (dissonance, disequilbrium) sets in train the reformation of the hypothesis, and so on. Without the condition of ready acceptance of the approximations, the whole hypothesis-testing-modification-cycle, would not occur. Neither would learning.

Employment

Young learner talkers need both time and opportunity to employ their immature, developing language skills. They appear to need both time and opportunity to employ their language with others.

and time alone, away from others to practise and employ what they've been learning. Ruth Weir's classic study of the pre-sleep monologues in which young children indulge is a demonstration of this form of employment (Weir, 1962).

Mutual exchanges between expert and novice

I used to refer to this as feedback, but I've changed the term. Feedback has mechanistic and behaviouristic overtones. It also implies a predetermined purposive on the part of the feed-back giver. My data (Cambourne, 1972) convinced me that parents are not consciously aware of the giving-feedback function which their exchanges with their children serve. Rather these exchanges appear to be serving the function of the sharing of information about both the language and the degree of control that the learner has over it at any one time.

When the learner-talker says, as he points to a cup on the table 'Dat cup', if it's a true statement (ie. it is a cup), the typical response, from a parent or adult is something like: 'Yes, that's a cup'. What is being exchanged here? The parent is supplying the missing bits of the child's approximation. The child is supplying the parent with an example of what he/she is currently capable of doing.

It is interesting to look back through my original 'bugging' study, and note what the parents did **not** do in these mutual exchanges. For example the child who informs the parent 'Dat cup', or something similar, was never given any specific information about the errors which had been made. No parent in my data ever made specific reference to the nature of auxiliaries, indefinite articles, or the pronunciation of 'th'. The information which is shared by the 'expert' in this kind of situation is a full, (as opposed to fragmented) version of what the learner attempted. It is as if the expert intuitively understands the importance of responsibility, and says to himself: 'I've no right to decide which aspect of this learner's approximation should be attended to right now, therefore I'll give him the conventional version of what I think he wanted to say, and leave him to decide which aspect he'll attend to and adjust'.

While exchanges may vary in detail and richness from parent to parent and sub-culture to sub-culture, they have certain things in common, viz. they are readily available, frequently given, non-threatening, **and with no conditions attached.** There's no penalty for not getting the conventional form correct, the very next time it's produced, there's no limit to the number of exchanges given. Quite often the expert, in these exchanges provides a scaffold for further language learning to occur ('Yes, that's Daddy's blue cup, isn't it?'), thus keeping the conversational game going, providing more opportunities to employ, practise, hypothesise, specify, elaborate, generalise, and so on. This does not mean that there's not an implicit contract involved (remember expectations?), or that it's merely 'pot-luck' learning. It's a very subtle form of contextually specific learning, which aims at maximum impact.

Evidence

Is there evidence that the principles which underly the successful natural learning of the oral form of the language can be applied to the learning of the written mode of the language? I believe so. The ubiquitous nature of the learning processes which characterise the acquisition of the spoken form of the language continually confronts me when I'm observing learners, kindergarten through university, acquiring various aspects and conventions of the written form of the language. When I observe and document what happens in classrooms where teachers genuinely try to replicate the learning-to-talk context with respect to literacy, I am continually reminded of the parallels. In the kind of research I do (a kind of ethnography), if instances of principles and/or working hypotheses which have been observed working in one context (eg. learning to talk) continually recur in other contexts, it is regarded as evidence of what more traditional rationalistic researchers call external validity, or generalisability. Like Guba,

I prefer the notion of 'fitting-ness', ie. the idea that if a working hypothesis fits more or less well into a context other than the one in which it was derived, then it serves to signal that what has been observed is not unique to only one context and thus has some external validity.

Teacher tolerance to approximations

One of the conditions which operate when a learner is learning to talk is the high degree of tolerance to approximations which his teachers show. When learning to talk, children are **not** expected to produce fully developed, adult, conventional language from the beginning. Immature forms (baby-talk) are warmly and joyously received. There is little concern by parent/tutors that these immature forms will become permanent features of the learner's repertoire. There is little expectation that the immature form will drop out immediately after feedback. Parents realise that it may persist for some time. Notwithstanding this, in the course of normal development these immature forms do drop out. For thousands of years, over billions of cases, babyish approximations to the adult forms have been dropping out of young learner's repertoires.

In those classrooms which we've been observing, where teachers make an attempt to parallel natural learning conditions with respect to the written mode of language, this same principle can be observed again and again. For example in nine kindergarten classes which I've studied over the last three years an analysis of the children's writing revealed that:

i) Immature spellings of words which the children used frequently went through several variations before the adult form was realised

ii) Once realised, the adult convention remained stable. The regression rate to previous immature forms was so close to zero to be negligible.

Tammy is the prototypical example of this observation. If one analyses Tammy's written products for the last half of her first year at school, (ie from July to November) the following facts emerge. During this period of time Tammy used 142 different words in her writing. Of these 142, she'd already learned to spell 55 of them conventionally, and continued to do so. Of the remaining 87 she achieved conventional spelling after several attempts with 18. These 18 remained stable everytime they were used hereafter.

The risk-taking, feedback, puzzlement, modification cycle

A common observation in the learning to talk context is the cycle which goes something like this:

A learner feels secure enough to have-a-go at testing a language hypothesis, actually tries his hypothesis out (has-a-go); gets feedback which causes puzzlement (intelligent unrest) which leads to modification of the initial hypothesis.

In the classrooms which we've been observing (ie. classrooms in which teachers are experimenting with natural learning) we've noted hundreds of these cycles in action; hundreds of examples of young learner-writers trying out their versions of a language convention, getting feedback that it's not quite conventional, which is followed by puzzlement and subsequent modification.

Ross is one of many such repeated examples. He was a rather slow beginner, and after months of prolonged repetitions of 'I am walking to school', eventually began writing more personally relevant material. This is what he produced one day toward to the end of September. My field notes show that the following conversation took place between Ross and myself when he completed his piece.

BC: What are these (full stops)? You've never put these in your writing before.

(BC had been observing Ross rather closely for most of the year)

ROSS: They're dots; they go at the end.

BC: Oh? Where'd you learn about them?

ROSS: In a book. They go at the end

BC: Do you know what they're used for?

ROSS: Yeah; they go at the end.

My field notes indicate that I decided that this was one of those famous Teachable moments: Here was a child ready to learn about full stops; here is the record of what followed:

BC: Ross, you're really very clever to have noticed them. They're called full stops, and they tell a reader when you've finished an idea.

ROSS: Nods

BC: You haven't quite got them right. Listen while I read to you what your story sounds like with the full stops where you've got them

I then proceeded to read, in a most exaggerated way, Ross's piece with the misplaced full stops.

BC: Is that what you wanted your story to say?

ROSS: (Looking at BC as if a little strange) Yeah

I gave up. The teachable moment had somehow passed

In my field notes, in the reflections I always make as I rework them, I noted that Ross's response was extremely logical. He'd heard the words he'd written down. The fact that some strange man from the University had left funny gaps everywhere was peculiar, but perhaps that's what people from the University do. What is interesting is that exactly one week later here is the piece Ross wrote:

This is Lindeman island. I'm on Lindeman island. There was childminding that I hated.

Note that all the full stops are in place. I tried to track down what had happened during the week. Ross's teacher denied teaching him about full stops. The children who worked around him thought they might have showed him, but couldn't be sure; his parents denied having showed him how full stops worked. Ross sticks with his story; he looked at a book, but also he thinks he just 'learned it in his head'. My best guess is that puzzlement caused by feedback I'd indirectly given him one week earlier was followed by re-engagement with the print he'd been reading, and a new hypothesis was the result.

Similar examples abound in our data. We are continually reminded of this parallelism in the course of our observations; over and over again we are witness to the same learning processes, which we know occur when the oral form of the language is being acquired, recurring with respect to the acquisition of the written mode of language, **when the same conditions are applied.** This happens irrespective of the age of the learners, the linguistic background of the learners, or the particular aspect of written language being studied. We have witnessed it in kindergarten classes both English and non-English-speaking-background children where writing is the focus (Cambourne et al, 1983), in grade 5 children where reading is the focus, (Brown and Cambourne, 1985), and in secondary and tertiary students learning to write expository prose.

This brings us full circle. I began this paper with the observation that the so-called successes of our system do not appear to have learned either to value writing, or to perceive themselves as writers. If, as I've argued in this paper, learning to control and use the written form of the language ought to be learned as successfully and as easily as the ORAL forms, why aren't the products of our school systems reflecting this fact?

This little anecdote from Richard Koch (1982) may help explain why:

. . . an uncle of the Russian writer Checkov wanted to teach his new kitten to chase mice. Everytime a mouse came out and the kitten failed

to give chase the uncle slapped it and severely scolded it, until finally whenever a mouse appeared, the cat ran in terror and hid.

My colleagues in psychology would explain the cat's behaviour by stating that it had developed a 'learned to avoid the mousing process'. I want to suggest that there has been (and possibly still is) a strong resemblance between Checkov's uncle's methodology with his cat, and the pedagogy of writing which has been used in many classrooms.